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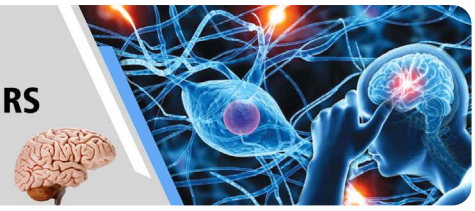

Mahler and Stern in Dialogue on the Origins of Aloneness and Loneliness: Convergences and Divergences

Evangelia Galanaki

Abstract

This study attempts to provide insight into the origins of aloneness and loneliness by comparatively and jointly examining the views of psychoanalysts and researchers Margaret Mahler and Daniel Stern. Their influential theories combine the developmental and the clinical perspective and have the potential to offer a deeper understanding of these universal and fundamental experiences. First, Mahler's and Stern's views on aloneness and loneliness are organized and presented in detail. Reformulations and critiques are also reported. Next, the two models are examined in relation to each other regarding the issues of aloneness and loneliness. Points of convergence and divergence are identified and discussed. These points revolve around the following issues: the onset of aloneness and loneliness experiences; the nature and developmental trajectories of aloneness and loneliness; the interpersonal context within which this development takes place; the ability to cope with loneliness and the factors that facilitate or hinder the development of this ability; and the related psychopathological pathways with their clinical implications.

Keywords: Mahler; Stern; Aloneness; Loneliness; Infancy; Psychoanalysis; Psychopathology.

Introduction

In the fields of psychology and psychiatry, research interest in *aloneness*, defined as the experience of being physically alone, and *loneliness,* defined as the experience of distress and pain when alone, has grown rapidly over the last few decades [1-3]. However, theoretical models on these fundamental human experiences seem to lag behind. In the domain of psychoanalysis, especially, the first and still influential studies on loneliness and *solitude*, defined as the potentially beneficial experience of aloneness, emerged from the field of psychoanalysis [4-7]. More recently, a number of studies have focused exclusively on aloneness, loneliness and solitude from various psychoanalytic viewpoints and primarily from a clinical viewpoint [8-16]. Although the first studies on aloneness, loneliness and solitude had both a developmental and a clinical perspective [5, 7], the origins and developmental sequence of these experiences have attracted much less attention within the psychoanalytic framework since then [17-18]. To date, only attachment theory has been used as a psychoanalytic developmental framework for loneliness [19-20]. The purpose of such studies could be twofold: first, to provide a better understanding of the origins and developmental progression of aloneness and loneliness; and second, to help researchers generate hypotheses for empirical investigations and construct theoretical models that incorporate psychoanalytic theories,

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which have broad clinical applications, with research in developmental psychology.

Therefore, this study identifies and examines, both comparatively and jointly, the views on aloneness and loneliness of two distinguished developmental theorists, researchers, and clinicians within the psychoanalytic field – Margaret Mahler and Daniel Stern. They were chosen for the following reasons: their theories have been and still are highly influential in the fields of developmental psychology, developmental psychopathology, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy; they combine developmental and clinical perspectives; there seem to be significant differences between them regarding the conceptualization of human development, prompting attempts at possible reconciliation or synthesis [21-27]; and they emphasize individual development in the interpersonal context during the first years of life, a critical issue for understanding the origins of aloneness and loneliness. First, Mahler's and Stern's views on aloneness and loneliness are presented in detail. Recent reformulations and critiques are also reported. Next, the two models are examined in relation to each other regarding the issues of aloneness and loneliness. Points of convergence and divergence are identified and discussed. These points revolve around the following issues: the onset of aloneness and loneliness experiences; the nature and developmental trajectories of aloneness and loneliness; the interpersonal context within which this development takes place; the ability to cope with loneliness and the factors that facilitate or hinder the development of this ability; and the related psychopathological pathways with their clinical implications.

Margaret Mahler: The alone and helpless baby, and loneliness as the cost of differentiation

Margaret Mahler (1897-1985) and her colleagues, based on systematic and extensive observations of mother-infant dyads as well as their clinical experience with children and adults, formulated a developmental and clinical theory for the first three years of life [28-32]. Mahler maintained that the psychological birth of the individual is not identical to biological birth but takes place gradually and is a process of *separation-individuation*. Separation is the child's emergence from the symbiotic fusion with the mother, and individuation is the formation of a separate individual self. Separation and individuation are two complementary developmental processes. Bergman [33, p. xvi] states that "the separation-individuation research was not the effect of the separation from mother but rather about the development of the separate self in the presence of mother". I would add that the entirety of Mahler's theory narrates the story of the individual struggling to find a way of dealing with their separateness and essential aloneness in the world.

During the *normal autistic phase*, in the first few weeks of life, infants are enclosed in an "autistic shell", undifferentiated from the environment, unaware of the mother's existence, and unable to invest in external stimuli, although they respond to them. There is only hallucinatory wish fulfillment, a primitive sense of omnipotence, created and maintained by the satisfaction of biological needs (Mahler accepts Freud's views on primary narcissism and the "stimulus barrier", Spitz's assertion about the objectless stage, and Anna Freud's claim about the need-satisfying part-object relationship). The word "autism" signifies a state of profound isolation and aloneness, but newborns are protected against it by their lack of awareness and sense of omnipotence. If the infant becomes fixated at this primitive phase, a possible outcome is infantile autism, which is characterized by the absence of emotional ties, the infant's inability to cope with internal and external stimulation, and a "seemingly self-sufficient contentedness – if only he is left alone" [31, p. 68].

In light of recent research on infants, the existence of the autistic phase is seriously challenged. As we shall see below, Stern [1985] completely denied that the infant experiences a state of normal autism. In 1982, Mahler herself, as Bergman [33, p. 5] reports, regarded the autistic phase as a phase of adjustment in extrauterine life, during which "the newborn has to achieve physiological homeostasis, that is adequate inner regulation in synchrony with the vocal and gestural rhythms of the caregiver; each infant is an active partner in the early dialogue". In addition, Stern [34] reported that Mahler, in a personal communication with him in 1983, admitted that this phase could have been named "awakening", a term very similar to Stern's term "emergent self". Pine [35, pp. 10-11], one of Mahler's principal colleagues, maintains that we can still speak of normal autism, although a "relative" one, in the sense of a "primary attunement to internal physiological stimuli". If the infant's isolation from the external world is no longer regarded as absolute, and the sense of omnipotence is not as strong as initially hypothesized, does this mean that the infant can experience moments of aloneness at such an early age? Is this aloneness too unbearable for the infant and too difficult to cope with at a time when memory is still weak, let alone the capacity for internalization of objects? And does this mean that infants already have a beginning awareness of their aloneness? These appear to be logical assumptions from the reconceptualization of the normal autistic phase, but the above reformulations of Mahler's theory do not include elaborations on this issue.

From the second month of life, infants enter the *normal symbiotic phase*, during which they begin to be aware of the need-satisfying object and act as if they and the mother are fused in a "dual unity", an omnipotent system with "the delusion of common boundary" [32, p. 45] between them. The "stimulus barrier" that protected the newborn from being overwhelmed by external stimulation is gone, meaning that infants are now alone – unless they replace the sense of aloneness with the delusion of omnipotent fusion (here,

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too, Mahler accepts Freud's views on secondary narcissism and Spitz's notion of the preobjectal stage). If the mother is indifferent, ambivalent, unpredictable, depressed, or overly intrusive, the child's symbiotic needs may either remain unsatisfied or become oversaturated. In the first case, the child longs for oneness with the mother (delayed hatching), and in the second case, the child enters the differentiation phase prematurely (premature hatching). In both cases, children are exposed –too early for them to understand and cope– to the sense of being alone in the world.

In symbiotic psychosis [31], a possible deviation of the normal symbiotic phase characterized by fixation in the stage of the need-satisfying part-object relationship, painful aloneness is prevalent. Individuation is not achieved, and the infant is caught between the terror of re-engulfment and the dread of aloneness, in other words, between annihilation panic and separation panic. The infant chooses the least painful state – the fused one.

It is important to note that Mahler attributes a profoundly social meaning to the symbiotic phase. She names it "social symbiosis" [32, p. 45] and believes it is optimal only when the mother encourages the eye-to-eye encounter with her baby – that is, only when these two human beings are able to face each other in reciprocal interaction, "the mutually reciprocal relationship which enables mother and infant to send out, and receive each other's signals, a compatible predictable interaction" [28, p. 340]. This view of Mahler is rarely cited by those who study her work and especially by her critics. Bergman [33] asserts that the beginnings of differentiation are present during the symbiotic phase, constituting a paradox of this stage. She also speaks of the "preverbal dialogue" between mother and infant and notes its similarity to Stern's [36] concept of mother-infant "dance". During this dialogue, the infant forms a "feeling of self", a "core" from which the individuated self will emerge (as we shall see below, Stern [34] uses a similar term –"sense of the core self"– for the same age period). This core self invests the mother, and the unity is "the primal soil from which all subsequent human relationships form" [32, p. 48].

The boundaryless mother-infant unity is regarded as the prototypical situation for all later merger experiences. These experiences are thought to result from regression to the primary state of fusion: throughout their lives, human beings feel a strong wish to restore the serenity, harmony, wholeness, bliss, and perfection of this unity, especially when under stress. The first fusion experience is crucial for the individual's mental health, not only because humans are small and vulnerable during infancy, but also because it is from this fusion that they will gradually differentiate themselves.

The experience of fusion during the symbiotic phase protects the infant from aloneness and helplessness. Moreover, in the next phases, when separation progresses and absolute unity no longer exists, every time the mother or the environment in general frustrates the child, the latter longs to restore the lost primary state. This yearning follows human beings throughout their lives (Mahler's view is very close to Freud's "oceanic feeling", the "feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" [37, p. 65]).

Based on Mahler's view, one may assume that during childhood, human beings seek such oneness experiences in nature, play, art, and so on; we recall the intermediate space between subjective and objective reality and the transitional phenomena analyzed by Winnicott [38]. As Louise Kaplan [39, p. 169] maintained in her book on Mahler's theory, the child, from the end of the first year of life, discovers another mother, perhaps more exciting than the biological mother, namely mother-earth, nature in general: "[…] the upright toddler is encompassed by the limitless open spaces of the new world. He molds his body to its invisible contours imagining yet again that he is at one with the universe". According to later reformulations of the symbiotic phase [40], in light of infant research, symbiosis may be better conceptualized as momentary merger experiences rather than ongoing ones, which continue to be very significant for many mother-infant dyads. With these experiences, the child –and I add the mother as well– copes with essential aloneness.

From about the fourth or fifth month, the separation-individuation process begins. In the first subphase of this process, called *differentiation and the development of the body image*, infants start to differentiate their body from their mother's and take the first steps toward separation. Crucial achievements of this subphase are the first manifestations of social behavior, mainly the smile, which is directed toward specific persons (the mother) and indicates that the bond between her and the infant has been established. Patterns of "checking back to mother" and comparative scanning, as well as the first stranger reactions and stranger anxiety, also appear during this age period. Mahler accepted Winnicott's [38] notion of transitional objects and transitional phenomena and maintained that they first appear during the differentiation phase. According to Winnicott, transitional objects and phenomena express the infant's capacity to master loneliness when physically alone. In the second subphase of the separation-individuation process (10 to 16 months, approximately), infants begin to move away from the mother (by crawling, standing without help, etc.) –this is the *early practicing subphase*– and later move even farther as they become able to walk, which is the *practicing subphase proper*. Infants explore the world, become increasingly familiar with it, and perceive, recognize, and enjoy their mothers from a greater distance than before. They gradually begin to practice skills, develop autonomy, and experience a state of elation when exploring the outer world as well as their own capacities. Mahler and colleagues [32, p. 70] spoke

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of a "love affair with the world", using Phyllis Greenacre's [41] phrase for the childhood of artists. With developing ego functions, infants manage to cope with small threats of object loss and with separation anxiety, which emerges during this subphase. They are more active in deciding when to move away and when to approach the mother, and while exploring the environment, often return to her for "emotional refueling".

For the practicing subphase, Mahler makes statements that are particularly relevant to the study of loneliness. During the mother's absence, toddlers exhibit low-keyedness as soon as they become aware of her absence. Motility is slowed, and interest in exploring the environment decreases. Toddlers experience a turn to the self, a kind of "imaging" of the mother, which helps preserve an ideal state of self and a crude image of the mother. Mahler parallels imaging with a miniature anaclitic depression and implies that it is synonymous with an "ego-filtered affect of longing" [32, p. 75]. I argue that this longing for symbiotic unity with the mother constitutes the loneliness of this subphase. The ability to cope with loneliness develops through the growth and exercise of autonomous ego functions. Mastering skills independently of the mother offers narcissistic solace. Emotional refueling provides toddlers with an appropriate "dose" of human contact and enhances their capacity to alleviate loneliness. Mahler also refers to the use of transitional space, in the Winnicottian sense, as a means of coping with separateness.

Children whose symbiotic phase was unduly prolonged or disturbed have difficulty dealing with feelings of loneliness during the practicing subphase: they constantly seek intimacy with the mother and spend little time exploring the outer world or developing inner skills. Mothers of such children usually had unfulfilled symbiotic needs from their own infancy and tried to satisfy them through fusion with their children. When the symbiotic phase ends (primarily due to the child's new capacities for autonomous functioning), those mothers may adopt a defensive attitude toward their own unmet needs, an attitude summarized by the phrase "The child has grown up". Children's difficulty in enjoying exploration and their desire to remain in contact with the mother reflects the mothers' struggle to balance support and distance. In some cases, mothers do not set limits on their children's practicing, resulting in the child feeling –and in some ways being– deserted by the mother, even if she is physically present. Such children may engage in dangerous activities and are prone to accidents because they are alone in their endeavors.

Other mothers display ambivalence at the end of the symbiotic phase. On some occasions, they avoid physical contact with their children; on others, they interrupt them during activities to restore contact. Such behavior indicates a lack of empathy on the mother's part and hinders the child's functioning when apart from her. Mahler [32, p. 85] cites philosopher Kierkegaard [42], who described the practicing subphase by associating walking with the support and encouragement the child receives from the mother:

> The loving mother teaches her child to walk alone. She is far enough from him so that she cannot actually support him, but she holds out her arms to him. She imitates his movements, and if he totters, she swiftly bends as if to seize him, so that the child might believe that he is not walking alone … And yet, she does more. Her face beckons like a reward, an encouragement. Thus, the child walks alone with his eyes fixed on his mother's face, not on the difficulties in his way. He supports himself by the arms that do not hold him and constantly strives towards the refuge in his mother's embrace, little suspecting that in the very same moment that he is emphasizing his need of her, he is proving that he can do without her, because he is walking alone.

In the *rapprochement subphase*, beginning in the middle of the second year and coinciding with the appearance of the symbolic function, children continue to distance from their mother to explore the external environment, but are simultaneously increasingly aware of their separateness and experience strong separation anxiety. They continually seek their mothers and seem to think: "What am I doing here all alone? Where is my mother? I need her". During this period, the mother must be emotionally available while encouraging the child toward independence.

At the beginning of this subphase, children start feeling the need to share discoveries with the mother and realize that their wishes do not always coincide with hers; the dual unity is no longer omnipotent. Between 18-20 and 24 months, a *rapprochement crisis* may occur. Children experience ambivalence: to walk away from the mother, to detach yet cling to her, to "shadow" her. This ambivalence may manifest as worry that the mother has left (even when present), inability to recognize her after brief separation, and indecision (see Erikson's [43] notion of doubt for the same age period) between entering the peer world and leaving the mother. Some mothers "shadow" their children because they cannot tolerate distance. Children then face both terror of fusion and fear of aloneness, often choosing suffocating love over absolute aloneness, risking the right to discover their place in the world.

By the end of this subphase, children normally resolve the crisis and find a unique distance from the mother, enabling optimal functioning. This distance allows children to feel separate beings and take pleasure in autonomy and social interaction, while maintaining closeness with the mother.

I maintain that the rapprochement subphase is critical for establishing the loneliness experience. During this period, the range of emotions broadens, and signs of empathy emerge. In early rapprochement, sadness in the mother's absence is prevalent. The still-weak ego cannot tolerate awareness of

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sadness, therefore defensive behaviors such as hyperactivity and tension are displayed. During the rapprochement crisis, the child must cope with sadness caused by loss of the love object (or the past symbiotic unity) and the realization of one's own smallness. A defensive mechanism is partial identification with parents, manifested, for example, as empathic understanding of sadness in other children. Symbolic function –language and symbolic play (e.g., ball play)– may also have defensive functions.

Furthermore, children gradually become aware of being a separate, unique individual and confront an essential dilemma: recognizing their separateness while simultaneously being unable to tolerate being alone and needing parental closeness for years to come. Mahler [32, p. 78] posits:

[…] toward the end of the practicing period, it had already begun to dawn on the junior toddler that the world is not his oyster, that he must cope with it more or less "on his own," very often as a relatively helpless, small, and separate individual, unable to command relief or assistance merely by feeling the need for it, or even by giving voice to that need.

The statement –"the relatively helpless, small, and separate individual" ("a relatively helpless, small, and lonesomely separate individual", as Mahler [30] writes elsewhere)– illustrates the essence of *existential aloneness*. Mahler suggests that during the rapprochement subphase, the human being becomes conscious of aloneness, experiences loneliness, and begins to long for contact and intimacy.

Beyond existential aloneness, however, Mahler's views indicate that inappropriate parental behavior may exacerbate loneliness. The less emotionally available the mother, the more intense the children's separation anxiety, and the more desperately the latter struggle for closeness – depriving themselves of the opportunity to practice ego functions leading to autonomy.

In the third year of life, children typically enter the subphase characterized by the *consolidation of individuality* and the *beginnings of emotional object constancy*. They gradually internalize a stable, positively invested mother image. Despite moderate tension and a desire for closeness, children begin to function more autonomously. The physical absence of the mother is replaced by a reliable internal representation that remains constant despite her absence or the pressure of instinctual drives or subjective distress. Children's capacity to play separately from the mother (reminiscent of the *capacity to be alone* as described by Winnicott [71]) now increases. In this critical developmental period, children achieve stable self-boundaries and begin forming their gender identity.

Mahler [32] contends that, having internalized an image of the love object, the child will not reject it or substitute it for another object when absent, but instead will long for it. During this phase, loneliness may have an object; it is not the diffuse sense of aloneness and helplessness characteristic of the rapprochement period. However, if the love object has been unpredictable, unreliable, or extremely intrusive, children may experience the sudden and painful collapse of omnipotence – both their own and the parents'. For example, extremely interfering mothers "remind" their children of their secret longing for oneness and reinforce their fear of inability to survive without maternal help.

In other cases, the love object detaches when most needed, thus failing to support children in their struggle with smallness, aloneness, and helplessness. The unpredictability and unreliability of the love object, particularly the lack of empathy, hinder the child from integrating the good and bad aspects of the object and internalizing a stable object representation. Consequently, autonomous ego functions do not develop normally. The child attempts to turn the love object into an external ego. This attempt induces ambivalence: aggressive drives toward the love object may be intense and expressed (e.g., through temper tantrums), yet the child cannot tolerate being without this external ego. The sense of aloneness and helplessness evident by the end of the practicing subphase not only persists but intensifies, becoming a way of being.

When this last subphase nears its end, children typically discover an optimal distance that allows both connection with the mother and maintenance of private space. Nevertheless, even now, this space is small. Children remain dependent and vulnerable. Having progressed toward emotional object constancy, they no longer fear losing their parents, but fear losing their love. If this occurs, children may sink into helplessness and profound loneliness.

Daniel Stern: "Being without another" – cosmic psychic isolation, and loneliness as the cost of symbolic function

Based on systematic research conducted by him and other investigators, Daniel Stern (1934-2012) formulated a pathbreaking theory of the interpersonal world of the infant during the first two years of life.

From birth to the second month, according to Stern [34], the *sense of emergent self and emergent relatedness* is prevalent. The infant is equipped with self-organizing capacities and seems directed toward social events. There is no lack of differentiation between self and other. There is no such thing as a normal autistic phase. As early as this age, vitality affects (in contrast to categorical affects, such as joy, anger, etc.) emerge from the infant's interactions with other humans and refer only to these interactions. Vitality affects are dynamic situations that include changes in motivation, appetites, and tensions, are not easily described in verbal terms, and could be characterized as "surging", "fading away", "fleeting", "explosive", etc.

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Infants' sociability is further developed and is more evident from the second to the sixth month of life, when they form a *sense of core self and core relatedness*, that is, of a separate unity with agency, cohesion, emotionality, and continuity in time (i.e., historicity). During this phase, which is not at all symbiotic, the infant differentiates between animate and inanimate objects and actively organizes the subjective experience of a self being with an other. Stern [34, p. 72) characterizes this phase as "the most exclusively social period of life". Mothers (or caretakers in general) hug and cuddle their babies, look into their eyes and are looked at by them, hold and are held by them, and engage in a host of other similar experiences that take place and are maintained only through the action or presence of an other.

During this period of life, the infant builds *representations of generalized interactions*. These are mental representations of generalized episodes of contact with other individuals (in which episodic memory plays the predominant role). Every time such a representation concerning self-with-an-other is activated, the infant has in mind an *evoked companion*. This representation, Stern contends [34, p. 118], accompanies the infant when physically alone:

In fact, because of memory we are rarely alone, even (perhaps especially) during the first half-year of life. The infant engages with real external partners some of the time and with evoked companions almost all the time. Development requires a constant, usually silent, dialogue between the two.

Therefore, the evoked companion is, for normally developing infants, a protection against the loneliness they would experience when the caretakers are absent.

Contrasting the sense of core self with Mahler's normal symbiotic phase, Stern [34] asserts that the child's experience is not fusion, but the experience of being with an other who regulates the child's self-emotions. The infant perceives the other as separate; the regulation or change in experience concerns only the infant (the core self), and this changed self is related to (not fused with) the core other. Merger experiences are not regarded as regressive but rather as a human achievement that presupposes the existence of a sense of self and other.

The most decisive period for the emergence of loneliness is the next one, which lasts approximately from the seventh to the fifteenth month and is characterized by the *sense of subjective self and subjective relatedness*. During that time, infants discover that they have a mind, that all people have minds, and that, even though these minds are distinguishable, they can share their inner subjective experience with each other – the focus of attention, intentions, and emotional states (vitality and categorical affects). In that way, intersubjectivity emerges, that is, the individuals' intentional tendency to share their experiences. The mother's empathy is no longer experienced as a simple response to the child's needs but as a process that brings the two minds closer. Infants experience both physical and psychic closeness. The latter takes the form of psychic disclosure and psychic penetrability, which is a strong motive, a need state. Infants must learn which parts of their subjective experience can be shared with others and which cannot, because they are outside the range of recognizable human experience. Therefore, Stern [34, p. 126] maintains that "at one end is psychic human membership, at the other psychic isolation". He continues elsewhere [34, p. 136]:

Opposite poles of this one dimension of psychic experience define different psychotic states. At one end is the sense of cosmic psychic isolation, alienation, and aloneness (the last person left on earth), and at the other end is the feeling of total psychic transparency, in which no single corner or potentially shareable experience can be kept private. The infant presumably begins to encounter this dimension of psychic experience somewhere in the middle, between the extreme poles, as most of us continue to do.

If the dyad fails in establishing true intersubjectivity, for example, if the mother does not manage to express emotional attunement, the developmental outcome will be closer to the pole of "cosmic psychic isolation", which means the experience of a lack of understanding (empathy) by others and the inability to share and communicate emotions, intentions, and interests. Moreover, "those feeling states that are never attuned will be experienced as alone, isolated from the interpersonal context of shareable experience" [34, pp. 151-152]. This indicates a kind of inner fragmentation and alienation. Stern [34] described a clinical case in which a young mother with schizophrenia and her ten-month-old daughter had not developed intersubjectivity in their relationship. The prognosis in this case was that, as the child grew, she would experience not a feeling of loneliness – because this presupposes sharing and its loss– but a sense of psychic isolation, which was expected to be ego-syntonic, acceptable (since the child knows very little about sharing experiences), and chronic.

From the fifteenth month onwards, with the advent of the *sense of verbal self and verbal relatedness*, the possible ways of self-being-with-an-other increase. This is due to the symbolic function which enables us to share parts of our subjective experience with greater ease. Moreover, language may function as a "transitional phenomenon" (in the Winnicottian sense) and can thus be used by the toddler to communicate with significant others during their absence. Stern seems to imply that the opportunities for expression and communication provided by language alleviate the child's loneliness.

However, entrance into symbolic order (in the Lacanian sense) has negative consequences as well. Stern asserts that symbolic function causes a *split* between lived experience

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and represented experience. Some parts of our experience – those that belong to the domain of the emergent, core, and subjective self– become nonshareable. The global subjective experience, derived from the unity of the senses, cannot be expressed through language. Only through the poetic use of language –and this constitutes a paradox– can analogy and metaphor be expressed and the globality of human experience communicated. Stern [34, pp. 272-273] writes that "the previous harmony is broken" and speaks of:

a general crisis in self-comprehension and self-experience, brought about by the attempt (bound to partial failure) at the verbal representation of experience. It affects all life issues, with as many consequences for intimacy, trust, attachment, dependency, mastery, and so on as it has for separation or individuation.

This crisis in self-comprehension occurs because for the first time the infant experiences the self as divided, and rightly senses that no one else can rebind the division. The infant has not lost omnipotence but rather has lost experiential wholeness.

These views imply the infant's helplessness. An estrangement from a part of the self has occurred. Stern [34, p. 182] adds:

But also with language, infants for the first time can share their personal experience of the world with others, including "being with" others in intimacy, isolation, loneliness, fear, awe, and love.

Discussing borderline personality disorder, Stern [34] associates previously known views about its etiology with the development of the senses of self. I underline this issue because, as Stern himself states, the experience of abandonment and the ensuing loneliness are the main characteristics of this disorder and may be alleviated only if the individual has the opportunity to experience holding, feeding (at first in the literal sense), touching, or merging. This is an experience of loneliness in the domain of the core sense of self. If borderline personality disorder has one of its main causes the unavailability and lack of empathy on the part of the mother [44], then loneliness is in the domain of the sense of the subjective self. If it is accepted that the patient with this disorder wishes to incorporate the object and therefore fears that engulfment of the object may take place [45], then Stern asserts that loneliness arises while the patient detaches from the object in order to protect it. According to Kernberg [46], an unsatisfying relationship with the object creates rage against it, the defensive mechanism of splitting begins to function to protect the object from the subject's rage, and the result is loneliness – again. This process –to protect the object from one's own rage– belongs to the domain of verbally represented experience, that is, to the sense of verbal self.

Stern believes that all the above views are correct, although none fully explains the etiology of borderline personality disorder. To interpret the loneliness of the patient with this disorder, we should consider various domains of the sense of self. Although all such domains are involved in this mental disorder, usually a specific domain suffers the greatest psychic pain in each case, and it is the psychotherapist's task to discover it with the patient and focus intervention on it.

Mahler's and Stern's theories as converging and diverging paths in the developmental and clinical domains

An outline of Mahler's and Stern's views on aloneness and loneliness in each developmental period of the first few years of life was presented above in an attempt to elucidate various facets and subtle nuances of these experiences. Based on this detailed outline, the attempt to identify points of convergence and divergence will revolve around the following issues: the emergence of the first experience of aloneness and loneliness; the nature and developmental course of these states; the interpersonal context within which this course takes place; the nature of the ability to cope with these states; the factors that facilitate the development of this ability; and the related psychopathological pathways. Table 1 illustrates the nature of aloneness and loneliness in each developmental phase described by Mahler and Stern. The issues of aloneness and loneliness are at the core of both Mahler's and Stern's theories. It is evident that both a "separation-driven" and an "attachment-driven" theory place emphasis on these issues. Of course, one may always keep in mind the main difference between these theories, that is, the opposite views of self-other differentiation in infancy. Nevertheless, the theories are not mutually exclusive; they overlap.

For Mahler, attachment is necessary during the separation process, whereas for Stern, autonomy takes place in the context of ongoing relationships. Therefore, although one would expect Mahler's theory to be more relevant to the study of aloneness and loneliness, due mainly to its emphasis on separation, Stern's theory also includes many important views on these topics. For both Mahler and Stern, the development of individuality and relatedness is a life-long process. Mahler expresses the classic psychoanalytic tradition, according to which, at the beginning of life, there is a lack of differentiation between self and other. This means that there is neither a sense of self nor a sense of other, since the other is perceived only indirectly, through need satisfaction. The normal developmental trajectory is toward gradual differentiation and emergence of individuality, in other words, from the undifferentiated "we" to the differentiated "I". Mahler's perspective is clinical and retrospective. She believed [31] that clinical cases illustrate, through developmental failures, the significance of the normal symbiotic phase and the necessity of gradual individuation. Working with adolescent and adult

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patients, she had the opportunity to reconstruct developmental failures in the first years of life. In contrast, Stern maintained that there is no autistic phase, but a differentiation of self and other from the beginning of life, and that the developmental aim is the gradual integration of self and other into a state that could be called "self-with-an-other" or the continuous unfolding of a genetically predisposed social nature. The concepts of separation and individuation may be useful clinical concepts, but Stern, observing normal infants and their mothers and considering various research data, set aside these concepts and attempted to distinguish between the development of self and psychopathology.

The first age period for which Mahler and Stern write explicitly about loneliness is the period between the second month and the end of the first half-year of life. Both refer to the literal sense of loneliness: aloneness or being physically alone. Mahler speaks of the "alone and helpless" baby (in the normal symbiotic phase), and Stern, indirectly, of the "self without an other" (in the domain of the core self). Both agree that a developmental process is necessary to protect the infant from the unfavorable consequences of aloneness during that period of life. However, Mahler and Stern disagree on the content of this process. Mahler contends that it is the fusion with the mother and the delusion of a common boundary, whereas Stern asserts that it is the representations of generalized interactions, mainly the evoked companion. Stern's views about fusion and merger experiences are closer to recent psychoanalytic views [47] on healthy, progressive oneness experiences (instead of the Freudian regressive ones), which helps the individual transcend oneself and feel at union with an other – the ultimate way of overcoming one's aloneness. Where Mahler and Stern seem to agree in general, as far as loneliness is concerned, is in the developmental phase covering the period from the last months of the first year of life to approximately sixteen months (practicing and the sense of subjective self, respectively). In both approaches, it is recognized that during this life period infants find themselves between two poles: separateness and symbiosis for Mahler, and cosmic psychic isolation and total psychic transparency for Stern. The developmental aim is the combination of autonomy and closeness (Mahler) or of communication and preservation of the private character of a part of the self (Stern). This means that the individual is expected to find the equilibrium between these two opposites, and this aim is facilitated by the mother's empathy, as both Mahler and Stern believe. Loneliness acquires a deeper meaning in this phase for both developmentalists: being alone in the world (the last person left on earth, as Stern wrote) and helpless (abandoned, as Mahler wrote) acquires a more metaphorical (mental) content than before. Physical distancing –which from now on takes place under the children's initiative due to their newly acquired motor capacities– may, under certain conditions (distancing at the wrong moment, prolonged distancing, accompanied by inappropriate maternal behavior, etc.), lead to psychic distancing or estrangement. The typical human fear of loneliness –in the form of separation anxiety– seems to peak during this life period.

Human experience is expanded, according to Stern, with the advent of symbolic abilities, whereas, according to Mahler, it is expanded with increased autonomous motility. Both Mahler and Stern seem to agree that, from the middle of the second year of life (rapprochement and the sense of verbal self, respectively), children must struggle with the forces that, depending on maternal behavior, pull them toward one pole or the other. They must work out the ambivalence manifested as a tendency toward approach and, at the same time, a tendency toward isolation, and resolve the dilemma: "I need to be close to parents – I need to be a separate being" (Mahler), or cope with the split in self-experience between shareable and nonshareable parts of this experience (Stern). In other words, the child must solve the rapprochement crisis or succeed in sharing personal experience, which includes the experience of loneliness. During this period of life, loneliness is the result of the toddlers' awareness that they are inevitably alone, without the mother's physical presence, according to Mahler. In contrast, Stern believes that loneliness results from a crisis in self-comprehension. The critical developmental antecedent in the infants' realization that they are alone in the world is motility for Mahler, whereas for Stern it is symbolic function. However, Mahler seemed to acknowledge (although she did not emphasize it) that language is also a means by which toddlers realize their aloneness. She wrote, for example, that even "giving voice" to needs is experienced by the toddler as an inadequate way to deal with separateness during the rapprochement subphase. Another point of convergence and divergence between Mahler and Stern is their acceptance of Winnicott's notion of transitional objects and transitional phenomena, which, according to Winnicott, serve as a means of dealing with loneliness. Mahler mentioned these phenomena for the first time when describing the differentiation subphase, during which the infant begins to experience separateness from the mother. Later, during the rapprochement crisis, she regarded these phenomena as helping the toddler distance and explore the environment while maintaining closeness to others (e.g., "reading" books). However, Stern makes a somewhat different statement when he speaks of language as a transitional phenomenon during the emergence of verbal self. He believes that the transitional object requires symbolic ability, and for that reason, the true transitional object and transitional phenomenon appear later than the Winnicottian "person-thing", which implies only episodic memory and some degree of self-other undifferentiation. It is evident that, according to Stern, true loneliness is the cost of symbolic ability, but at the same time, it can be alleviated only by symbolic function.

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In Mahler's approach, the end of the differentiation process is the internalization of the mother's image, which protects children from feeling lonely when alone, binds loneliness to an explicit and irreplaceable object, and renders it a longing for that object. The successful differentiation has its cost: the individual no longer feels oneness with the mother and becomes a separate being who will always wish to restore the state of primary fusion. Although Stern rejects this primary fusion and maintains that development proceeds toward more complex ways of relatedness, in which the self is the primary organizing principle, he also supports the view that the normal endpoint of this process has its cost: the split in self-experience. Therefore, both contributors provide their own interpretation of loneliness in human existence. Loneliness is, according to Mahler, the longing for the love object, whereas, according to Stern, loneliness is the estrangement from a part of self-experience in relation to an other. Both Mahler and Stern seem to agree that individuals cannot experience real loneliness if they have not formed a stable first relationship and developed normally during the first periods of life. This means that the child is expected to have passed through the symbiotic union with the mother (Mahler) or through the domains of the emergent, the core, and the subjective self (Stern). If this does not happen, the individual is left either with the sense of aloneness, smallness, and helplessness (separation panic rather than separation anxiety), which is characteristic of infantile psychosis (Mahler), or in cosmic psychic isolation (Stern).

Mahler's and Stern's views on this kind of profound aloneness or cosmic isolation are very similar to what psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichmann [4, p. 309] described in her pioneering article on loneliness, where she wrote: "The kind of loneliness I am discussing is nonconstructive if not disintegrative, and it shows in, or leads ultimately to, the development of psychotic states". Searching for the origins of this frightening and uncanny feeling, Fromm-Reichmann drew upon the definition of loneliness given by another pioneer scholar on this issue, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan [48, p. 290]: "the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with an inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy, for interpersonal intimacy". She also traced loneliness back to the longing for interpersonal intimacy (contact and tenderness), which is present within every human infant and, in some cases, remains unsatisfied.

An implicit developmental course of loneliness seems to emerge in the writings of both Mahler and Stern. Initially, loneliness has a literal, concrete content – it is almost identical to aloneness, a state resulting from lack. Gradually, as the individual's capacity to tolerate the physical absence of significant others increases, loneliness acquires a more metaphorical, abstract content – it results from the absence of the object and reflects the fear of losing it and losing the love of it as well as the longing for it. Regarding the capacity to be alone [7], both developmentalists regard it as a late achievement, although Stern believes it may occur earlier (sense of core self, 2-6 months) than Mahler does (practicing, 10-16 months). Mahler and Stern seem to differ regarding the details of this developing capacity. According to Mahler, the inevitable loneliness, which stems from one's physical separateness, is managed through the internalization of the image of a stable other; loneliness is regarded as intertwined with separation from the mother and her physical absence. Stern seems to imply that, to cope effectively with loneliness, one must gradually understand that the inner self cannot always be communicated with and develop skills for managing loneliness through refining personal relationships and working toward being understood by others (a view that clearly originates from Winnicott's [49, p. 187] beliefs about the "incommunicado element" of the self). Finally, the individual's ability to cope with loneliness is associated, according to Mahler, with physical presence/absence and internalization, whereas, according to Stern, it is associated with self-comprehension and relating. Although these views differ regarding the source of loneliness –outer versus inner source, respectively– they both incorporate self- and interpersonal elements. Mahler's conceptualization may be more helpful in explaining the individuals' sense that, although physically alone, they are not lonely because of reliable internalized objects. Stern's conceptualization may be more helpful in interpreting the individuals' sense that, although in close proximity to others, they cannot communicate their inner, private self – that is, experiencing loneliness in the midst of a crowd.

Table 1: The nature of loneliness and loneliness in the theories of Mahler and Stern

Mahler	Stern
Normal autistic phase (0-1 month) Autistic shell Profound isolation No awareness of aloneness	*Emergent self* (0-2 months) (No mention to aloneness and loneliness)
Normal symbiotic phase (2-5 months) Possible premature awareness of aloneness and helplessness, due to absence or failure of symbiosis Ability to cope with aloneness through symbiotic fusion/merger experiences	*Core self* (2-7 months) Self being without an other (physically) Ability to cope with loneliness through representations of generalized interactions and the evoked companion
Separation-individuation process	
Differentiation and the development of the body image (5-9 months) Stranger anxiety *Practicing* (10-16 months) Separation anxiety, fear of aloneness and abandonment Loneliness and low-keyedness during mother's absence Aloneness and helplessness due to sudden collapse of symbiosis Ability to cope with loneliness by autonomous functioning and emotional refueling Opposite pole: prolonged symbiosis	*Subjective self* (7-15 months) One pole: Cosmic psychic isolation, alienation, and aloneness (the last person left on earth) due to failure of attunement and of intersubjectivity Opposite pole: total psychic transparency

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Rapprochement (16-24 months) *Early rapprochement* (16-18 months) Loneliness as sadness during mother's absence	*Verbal self* (15 months –) Inevitable crisis in self-comprehension Split in self-experience Ability to cope with loneliness by sharing at the symbolic level
Rapprochement crisis (18-24 months) Greater awareness of physical separateness Resurgence of stranger anxiety Dilemma between closeness and separateness – ambivalence "Shadowing" mother Ability to cope with loneliness by partial identification, language, symbolic play	
Consolidation of individuality and the beginnings of emotional object constancy (24-30 months)	
Real loneliness as longing for a specific object Fear of losing the object's love Ability to cope with loneliness by internalization of mother image and by cognitive capacities	

Conclusion

Mahler's and Stern's theories seem to provide distinct but somewhat overlapping viewpoints on the origins, developmental course, and pathology of human aloneness and loneliness. A joint view incorporating both theories and placing emphasis on both separation/individuation and attachment/intersubjectivity may prove useful for understanding these issues within developmental theory and clinical practice, as well as for stimulating further research efforts in these areas.

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