

Differentiation of Self, Splitting, and Dysfunctional Individuation in Emerging Adulthood

Rafael Galvao Guerra

University of Notre Dame

Differentiation of Self, Splitting, and Dysfunctional Individuation in Emerging Adulthood

The transition to college poses significant adaptation challenges. Emerging adults must learn how to negotiate new interpersonal relations with peers, romantic partners and professors in what some may perceive as a naturally occurring “strange situation” that activates the attachment system. This transition also coincides with the crucial psychological challenge of *separation-individuation*. In general terms *separation-individuation* is the process by which one becomes differentiated from a past or present relational experience (Karpel, 1976). According to Mahler there are phases of *separation-individuation* that mark early ego development in infancy (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975), and there are strong reasons for thinking that these phases are also relevant for understanding the “second phase” of individuation in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Josselson, 1980).

In both the first (infancy) and second (adolescence) phases of individuation the goal is to become an autonomous self, but in the context of mutually validating relationships. Moreover faulty individuation can have important clinical significance as well. For example, Pine (1985) argued that pathology of separation-individuation is manifested as an inability to tolerate aloneness, the need to establish control over others or, more seriously, uncertain self-other boundaries, the experience of merger with another and the loss of existential self (Pine, 1985).

Given the centrality and importance of individuation to successful ego development, it is surprising that relatively little research has been devoted to it. Perhaps this is because there are few suitable psychometrically valid assessment tools. However, one promising measure is a 19-item Dysfunctional Individuation Scale (DIS) developed by Lapsley and his colleagues. This scale was derived from a previous research that was anchored in Mahler’s theory (Lapsley, Aalsma & Varshney, 2011) and which operationalized Pine’s (1985) account of self-other

pathology. The first goal of this project is to examine its factor structure using confirmatory factor analysis, with the goal of reducing the scale to an acceptable minimum in order to facilitate its use as a diagnostic screen.

A second purpose is to further examine its construct validity by assessing its relationship to Bowen's theory of self-differentiation. Bowen theory offers an interesting psychoanalytic take on the development of the self. One of the central constructs of Bowen theory is *differentiation of self*, which is subdivided into intrapsychic and interpersonal components. In the intrapsychic level, this construct refers to one's ability to balance emotions and rational thought in the decision-making process. Greater differentiation leads to calmer and more logical decisions, while poor differentiation leads to higher degrees of emotional reactivity and impulsive emotional decision-making. At an interpersonal level, *differentiation of self* deals with the balance between intimacy and independence from others. The measure of *I Position* (one of dimensions in the *differentiation of self* index) specifically looks at the degree to which one maintains a strong self of self that can endure peer pressure (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). The current *differentiation of self* index, formulated by Skowron and Friedlander, consists of a 25 item self-report scale that is designed for adults (age 25+), though we believe significant results can be obtained by testing it on adolescents of a younger age.

Another viewpoint on ego development comes from the developmental construct of *splitting*. This construct comes from object-relation theory and it refers to the degree to which children organize stimuli into the bipolar dimension of good and bad. However, maladaptive splitting can become a defense mechanism and as a result, the person will tend to see all good and all bad (Gould, Prentice & Ainslie, 1996). This construct can be perceived as an integral part in the core of differentiation of self, once maladaptive splitting will increase the gap between one's

self and others, thus impacting the interpersonal dimension of *differentiation of self*, and ultimately, impacting the intrapsychic dimension as well.

This conception of splitting aligns with *dysfunctional individuation* where splitting is regarded as a defense mechanism (Mahler et al. 1975) and where items are included on the DIS. Thus, a 41-item Splitting Index (SI) is expected to converge with both the *dysfunctional individuation* scale and the *differentiation of self* index.

In light of these relationships, a third purpose of this project is to examine the comparative and incremental validity of the shortened *dysfunctional individuation* scale to predict various aspects of adjustment to college. Therefore, the goals of this project can be summarized as: (1) to reduce the *dysfunctional individuation* scale using confirmatory factor analysis; (2) to examine the construct validity of *dysfunctional individuation* in comparison to *differentiation of self* and *splitting*; (3) to assess the comparative and incremental validity of the shortened *dysfunctional individuation* scale (PATHSEP) to predict various aspects of adjustment to college.

In this project, we will work with unanalyzed data ($n=406$) from a 2007/2008 study conducted by Dr. Daniel Lapsley. This study included the three scales of interest in this project: Differentiation of Self Index, the Dysfunctional Individuation Scale and the Splitting Index; along with indices of psychiatric symptoms (Clinical Anxiety Scale, Brief Symptom Inventory). Using confirmatory factor analysis, the PATHSEP scale will be optimized to a version that is more accessible and concise for the clinical setting. Graphical models detailing the theoretical relationships between the scales will also be attempted. For instance, using graphical analysis, we can test whether the differentiation of self showcases more optimizing features as opposed to a better linearity in the dysfunctional individuation scale. In this framework, a theoretical

teenager with a score of *zero* in dysfunctional individuation would be at an optimum point in the *differentiation of self* curve (i.e Figure 1).

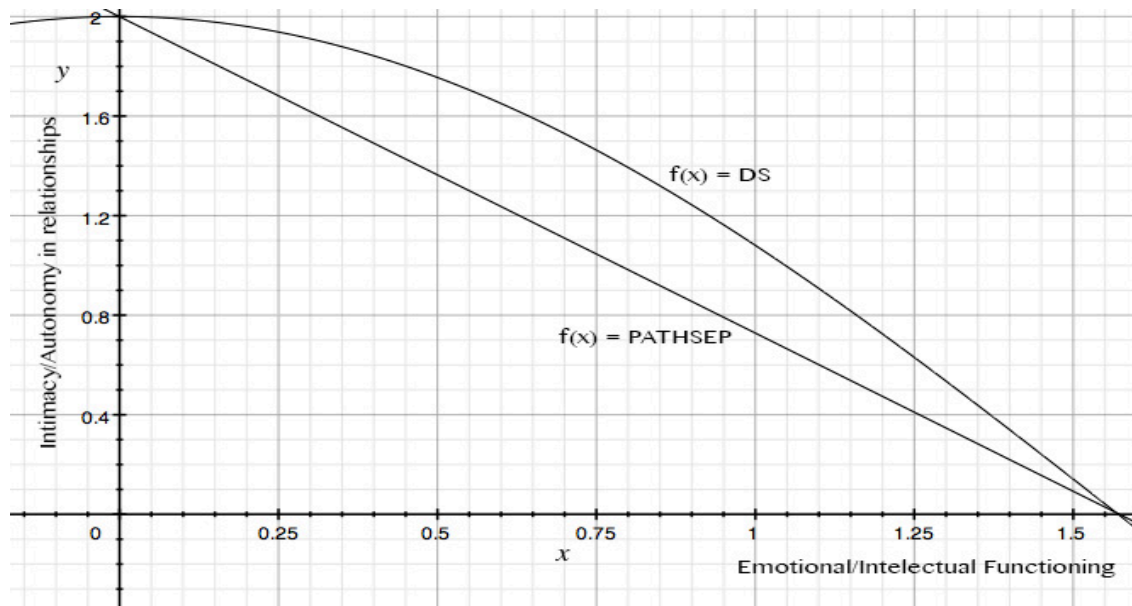


Figure 1: Potential Graphical Relationship Between Dysfunctional Individuation (PATHSEP) and Differentiation of Self (DS).

Data analysis will begin June 9 and end August 2. During this period, a research paper will be written in collaboration with Dr. Daniel Lapsley and graduate student Paul Stey so that it can be published in a journal and/or be presented at a conference. Given the clinical usefulness to use the shortened *dysfunctional individuation* scale, this project would be an ideal first step to a bigger project in a partnership with the juvenile center. Given the overall usefulness of the shortened scale to the field of psychology, the paper will be submitted for publication before the end of 2013. This project will take place under the direction of Dr. Daniel Lapsley, who runs the Adolescent Psychology Laboratory in the department of Psychology here at Notre Dame. His interests involve adolescent identity, moral development, and dysfunctional individuation. Throughout the summer, frequent meetings with Dr. Lapsley will take place to provide theoretical and quantitative support on the project.

This project would serve as the first step of a bigger collaboration between me, Dr. Daniel Lapsley and Dr. Lee Anna Clark. In this upcoming project, potentially involving the juvenile center, we will apply the findings in this study to identify risk factors in adolescents for personality disorders at a later age. Having an optimized dysfunctional individuation scale is crucial for the upcoming project. Both projects would also serve as the basis for my upcoming senior thesis.

References

- Gould, J. R., Prentice, N. M., & Ainslie, R. C. (1996). The splitting index: Construction of a scale measuring the defense mechanism of splitting. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 66*(2), 414-430.
- Josselson, R. (1980). *Ego development in adolescence*. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 188-210). New York: Wiley.
- Karpel, M. (1976). Individuation: From fusion to dialogue. *Family Process, 15*(1), 65-82.
- Lapsley, D. K., Aalsma, M. C., & Varshney, N. M. (2001). A factor analytic and psychometric examination of pathology and separation-individuation. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 57*(7), 915-932. doi: 10.1002/jclp.1059.
- Mahler, M., Pine, F. & Bergman, A. (1975). *The psychological birth of the human infant*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pine, F. (1985) *Developmental Theory and Clinical Process*. Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press.
- Skowron, E. A., & Friedlander, M. L. (1998). The differentiation of self inventory: Development and initial validation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 45*(3), 235-246. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.45.3.235.
- Steinberg, L., & Silverberg, S. B. (1986). The vicissitudes of autonomy in early adolescence. *Child Development, 57*(4), 841-851.