Longitudinal Study of Dysfunctional Individuation in Emerging Adulthood

The process of individuation is widely considered to be an important developmental challenge facing adolescents and young adults (Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989). Individuation is a process through which the adolescent seeks to define new boundaries between his or her self and other people (Lapsley and Stey, 2012). The first phase of individuation occurs in infancy (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975), but recurs in the second and third decades of life as one faces the transition to adolescence and emerging adulthood (Josselson, 1980). The goal is to reach a "happy medium," without excessive dependence or independence from others. However, this goal is not always achieved. Failure to secure an adequate resolution of self-in-relationship during the individuation process elevates the risk of adjustment problems. Hence the ability to identify dysfunctional individuation is a high research priority with decided implications for counseling intervention (Lapsley and Stey, 2012).

Background

Given its centrality for understanding important development transitions, it is surprising that there are relatively few assessments or ways of measuring separation-individuation. Each of the existing measurements that assess this construct has important deficiencies. For example, the Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI), which measures psychological separation, is exceptionally long. It has 69 items broken down into four lengthy subscales (Hoffman, 1984). These subscales must be administered twice, once for mother and once for father; this makes it burdensome to administer and has doubtful concurrent validity (Lapsley and Horton, 2002). Another scale, the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA) measures important aspects of separation-individuation (Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986). It has strong validity evidence but it, too, has multiple subscales that makes it difficult to use as a diagnostic screen.

A more promising measure was reported by Christenson and Wilson (1985) who developed a one-factor, 39-item measure of pathology of separation-individuation modeled on a clinical profile derived from Mahler's theory of individuation (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). This scale differentiated borderline patients from a control group. A series of scale reduction studies by Lapsley and colleagues (Lapsley, Aalsma, & Varshney, 2001) resulted in a reliable, 19-item single factor scale that shows a strong pattern of concurrent validity with pathological adult attachment, psychiatric symptoms, and college adjustment problems.

Proposed Research Project

The present study has three goals. First, I will conduct further analysis of the factor structure of the 19-item Dysfunctional-Individuation Scale to see if further scale reduction is possible. This will be done using confirmatory factor analysis in order to identify a scale most suited to serve a brief diagnostic screen. This goal can be fulfilled with the data collected at Time 1 of the longitudinal study.

Second, this study will be the first to attempt to identify cut-off scores on the DIS that have clinical significance. This was the goal of the original measure of pathology of separation-individuation designed by Christenson and Wilson (1985), although cut-off scores have not been attempted on later versions of the assessment. In the present study we will examine the association of dysfunctional individuation with cut-offs scores on the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1961). The data needed to determine this is also collected at Time 1, so this goal can be accomplished after analysis.

Third, this project initiates a three-wave longitudinal study that will eventually serve as my senior thesis. With longitudinal data, it will be possible to note and examine change over time. Since the study will continue to track graduated seniors next semester, I will examine

stability and change in certain indices of adjustment (e.g., depression, stress, self-esteem) during the transition out of college. I hypothesize that depression will increase because of distance from social contacts, stress will increase for those alumni who have not yet found jobs, and self-esteem will decrease since they are no longer have experience in their environment like they had as seniors at the university.

Method

Since one of the aims of this study calls for a longitudinal design, this study will have two waves of data collection. In order to have enough time to collect two samples, the first wave will occur during the spring 2013 semester. The Institutional Review Board (IRB), a committee that reviews research proposals to ensure ethical conduct with all human subjects, has already approved the questionnaires that are to be used in this study.

The sample is a randomized sample of Notre Dame students. These students will be invited to participate via email. They will be informed that the study is a project investigating personality and college adjustment, and they may complete a 15-minute, online survey in order to obtain $5. This compensation will be mailed to them within one week of survey completion. In order to maximize participation, two reminder emails will be sent to them before the questionnaire is due. If participants have questions, they will be instructed to contact the Adolescent Psychology Lab for which the email address is provided.

For the first wave, the questionnaire given to the participants is comprised of six measures. The 19-item DIS scale, as described earlier in the "Background" section, is included, as is the respected test of depression, the Beck Depression Inventory II. The College Adjustment Scale evaluates family problems, interpersonal problems, and self-esteem problems in college students (Anton & Reed, 1991). The Big Five Inventory evaluates to what degree participants

possess each of the Big Five personality factors, which are extraversion, neuroticism, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). The questionnaire will encompass the concepts of anxiety, separation anxiety, need denial, and healthy separation (key aspects of separation-individuation) as measured by the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence, (SITA) (Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986). The final measure in the questionnaire is the Perceived Stress Scale, which examines how people appraise situations in their lives as stressful or not and how they cope with the stressful situations (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).

Schedule

The data collected from this sample will be coded and analyzed beginning in the spring and continuing into the summer. I will be returning to Notre Dame to analyze this data for several hours a day throughout the month of July. This coming summer will also be a time of preparation for the next wave of data collection. Another, shorter questionnaire will be administered to the same sample during the fall 2013 semester, with coding and analysis to follow. The data from the two waves will be compared and analyzed.

During the spring semester, I will be meeting with the Adolescent Psychology lab, under the direction of Professor Daniel Lapsley, as this study commences. As the data is collected from the participants of this study, these meetings will prove essential to answering the research questions for the first wave of data, and, next fall, the comparison of the first wave of data to the second to see if results are as hypothesized.

Personal Goals and Publication of Findings

One of the goals of this research project is to use the results for my senior thesis, which I will write next year. I am very interested in taking the Honors Senior Thesis course offered at

Notre Dame, and I am sure that the experience I will gain from writing a thesis will help me achieve acceptance into an Industrial-Organizational psychology graduate program upon completing my undergraduate studies. I feel qualified to do this research because I have taken Developmental Psychology, Adolescent Development, Research Methods, and Statistics courses at Notre Dame. Professor Lapsley will be a big help, I am sure, because he is very interested in the concept of dysfunctional individuation and has written many articles on the topic. Beyond the thesis, I also hope to be able to share the results of this project to a larger audience in the psychological community. I would like to present the results at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence Society for Research on Adolescence, an organization dedicated to learning about adolescence through research in different disciplines.

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Budget Justification

        I am requesting $4,428 in order to carry out my research project effectively. We will elicit 450 randomized subjects from the Notre Dame student body and compensate them with $5 each. That comes out to $2,250 if all subjects participate. Furthermore, in order to mail compensation to each participant, we will need envelopes and stamps. I am itemizing $15 for the cost of purchasing the envelopes, and $46 for the cost of the stamps necessary to mail compensation to the subjects who live off-campus (since on-campus mail does not require postage). Since this research will be carried out on the campus of the University of Notre Dame, I am itemizing the cost of my rent at Irish Crossings, which is $862 for one month, and the utilities for one month which will be around $100. I also am itemizing $35 per day for food. As I will be researching for 33 days at Notre Dame (July 1st-August 2nd), the cost of food will come to a total of $1,155. This all comes to a total budget of $4,428.