Parental Psychological Control and the Development of Identity in Emerging Adulthood

Lisa Rague

University of Notre Dame

Author Notre

Lisa Rague, Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame.

This work was funded by grants from the Office of Undergraduate Research. The author wishes to thank Dr. Daniel Lapsley and Paul Stey, as well as all the undergraduate members of the Moral Adolescent Psychology Lab, for their input and feedback throughout the process of conducting this research.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lisa Rague, Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556. E-mail: lrague@nd.edu
Parental Psychological Control and the Development of Identity in Emerging Adulthood

Over the course of a child’s development, there may be great variation in the parent-child relationship. The role of a parent in an infant’s life is very different from the role of a parent in an adolescent’s life. Some of the biggest changes in parental roles come during the important developmental stage of emerging adulthood, a time when an individual attempts to make a successful transition from adolescence into young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Parenting factors have been shown to play an important role in the success of an emerging adult in making this transition (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2010; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Sierens, 2009). Therefore, it is important to examine the different parenting techniques used during emerging adulthood and determine which styles are most beneficial in fostering a successful transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

Arnett (2000) defined emerging adulthood as the developmental stage characterized by significant exploration and experimentation with different identity roles, occurring roughly between the ages of 18 and 25. While the ultimate goal of emerging adulthood is to establish a long-term and stable adult role in society, the developmental period itself is mainly a period of transition. Most emerging adults tend to perceive themselves as somewhere in between adolescence and young adulthood. When asked if they felt like they had reached adulthood, approximately 60% of emerging adults said that in some ways they felt like an adult, but in other ways they did not (Arnett, 2000). Generally, commitment to the identity of an adult indicates a successful transition through emerging adulthood.

Arnett (2000) identified two features that set this developmental stage apart from adolescence and young adulthood. First, emerging adulthood is characterized by a concentrated effort to develop an individual identity, whereas this process is less central to adolescence and
young adulthood. The identity development process may begin during adolescence, but it is not until emerging adulthood that this process becomes more focused. Similarly, identity exploration is not a prevalent process during young adulthood, because most young adults, by definition, have committed to an identity. Therefore, emerging adults are unique in their ability to explore and experiment with different identities. This exploration is possible because emerging adults are able to exert more independence than they did as adolescents, but they also have not committed to an adult identity, and are not yet bound by the responsibilities that come with maintaining an adult role in society. Secondly, this exploration of identities causes emerging adulthood to be characterized by a higher level of variability than both adolescence and young adulthood. While demographic consistency exists for adolescents and young adults in terms of relationship, occupational, and residency status, no such norms exist for the emerging adult (Rindfuss, 1991). In sum, emerging adulthood is differentiated from adolescence and young adulthood by its high level of variability, as well as the high rate of identity exploration that causes this variation.

Emerging adulthood is an extremely important developmental period, as some of the biggest and most influential life decisions are made starting as early as 18 years old (Martin & Smyer, 1990). Furthermore, because some of these decisions may lead to significant challenges in the emerging adult’s life (Litalien, Lüdtke, Parker, & Trautwein, 2013), there is an interest in determining how the emerging adult reacts to these challenges and how these reactions affect the achievement of a successful transition and overall well-being. In general, emerging adulthood seems to be a time of psychological well-being. Over the course of emerging adulthood, individuals show less depressive symptoms, less expressed anger, and higher self-esteem (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006). However, certain factors, such as individual and family characteristics, can influence the course of a specific individual’s development and affect the
psychological well-being they present by the end of emerging adulthood (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006). Thus, only by successfully transitioning through emerging adulthood will an individual be able to fully participate in adult society. An unsuccessful transition, characterized by unrealistic expectations and uncertainty about one’s adult identity, may negatively impact an individual’s adjustment into adult society (Arnett, 2007).

The parent-child relationship is an interesting example of how relationships change during emerging adulthood. Before emerging adulthood, adolescents are dependent upon their parents, and parents may exert high levels of control over their children’s activities. However, upon entering emerging adulthood, children begin the process of forming their own identities, which requires making decisions based on values and attitudes they have established for themselves. In order to complete emerging adulthood successfully, individuals must rely less on the opinions of their parents and more on their own values and opinions when it comes to making life decisions (Galambos et al., 2006).

Another way to approach this changing relationship between parents and their children is to consider it from the parents’ point of view. If the emerging adults’ goal is to develop an identity based on their own values, then parents will need to step back and allow their children to make life decisions on their own, without imposing their own decision-making. This is an adjustment for parents who may be accustomed to having control over their children’s lives, and depending on the parents’ reaction to this adjustment, there may be more variation in parenting styles used in dealing with emerging adults. Thus, an important issue during emerging adulthood is how various parenting styles foster or inhibit the transition from adolescence into young adulthood. Studies show that good parenting styles, such as authoritative parenting, lead to better outcomes, such as lower levels of psychological distress symptoms. Furthermore, less effective
parenting styles, such as neglectful parenting, can result in psychological distress that may affect an emerging adult’s ability to successfully develop an adult identity (Shucksmith, Hendry & Glendinning, 1995).

One method of parenting that may have a negative impact on the child is that of excessively high parental psychological control (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994). Parental psychological control affects the psychological and emotional development of children (Barber, 1996) by targeting children’s emotional states in order to manipulate their thoughts and behaviors. For example, love withdrawal involves parents acting less friendly towards their children or refusing to talking to them altogether. Another example is guilt induction, which involves parents reminding their children of everything they “owe” their parents, and bringing up instances when the child made a mistake and disappointed the parent (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Sierens, 2009). In using these methods of controlling their child, parents may disregard or even act disparagingly towards their child’s emotional and psychological needs, as well as inhibit the child’s independent expression and development of self-efficacy (Barber, 1996). Whereas this method of parenting tends to be destructive in all stages of development, it may be particularly harmful during emerging adulthood due to its tendency to impair a child’s ability to explore and experiment with different identities (Barber, 1996), and ultimately prevent them from establishing a healthy adult role in society.

Research indicates that parental psychological control does seem to have a negative impact on identity development, and is correlated with adverse effects later in life (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Baumrind, 1966; Becker, 1964), such as high anxiety and depressive disorders (Barber et al., 1994; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2010). However, the link between parental psychological control and psychological well-being may not be as
straightforward as it first appears. In a study by Bean, Barber, & Crane (2006), maternal psychological control was only moderately correlated with depression, while paternal psychological control showed no significant correlation with depression at all. Furthermore, there is little existing research on how the relationship between psychological control and depression is established. One exception is a study by Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez, & Goossens (2005), which established a mediational role of intra-personal aspects of perfectionism, such as concern over mistakes and doubts about actions, in the relationship between psychological control and depression. This study establishes the possibility of a more complex relationship between psychological control and depression, and further research must be conducted to investigate the complexities of this association.

Psychological control can affect two important processes that occur during emerging adulthood: identity development and individuation. Identity development is the process of preparing to form an adult identity in the context of previous childhood identities (Erikson, 1956), while individuation involves forming an independent adult identity in the context of ongoing relationships (Blos, 1962). Both of these processes are involved with forming an adult identity, and therefore are directly connected to the main goal of emerging adulthood. Furthermore, they both may be affected by the use of parental psychological control, in that psychological control may impair the ability to engage in either of these exploratory processes (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2012; Luyckx et al., 2007).

Identity development is the main goal of emerging adulthood. Specifically, emerging adults strive to successfully develop an adult identity in society. The theory of identity development includes four identity statuses (Erikson, 1956; Marcia, 1966), which can be defined in terms of two dimensions; identity exploration, the process of seeking out and evaluating...
different identity alternatives, and identity commitment, the degree to which a person is invested in any given identity alternative (Marcia, 1966). Thus, a person with identity achievement status has explored many different identity alternatives, and has committed to an identity based on this exploration. Alternatively, a person with identity diffusion status is low in both identity commitment and identity exploration; that is, has not started the exploration process or made a commitment. Identity foreclosure status involves being highly committed to an identity, without having explored different identity alternatives. This is apparent in emerging adults whose parents have high expectations regarding their child’s future, and the child, feeling like there are no alternatives, neglects to attempt the identity exploration process. Finally, a person in identity moratorium status is in the midst of the identity exploration process, but has yet to make a commitment to an identity. Moratorium can be seen as the precursor to identity achievement (Marcia, 1980).

The most recent research has elaborated on the dimensions of exploration and commitment (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2008). The two facets of commitment are “commitment making”, describing the degree to which emerging adults have made choices about their identity, and “identity with commitment”, describing the degree to which emerging adults internalize these decisions. Similarly, identity exploration can be described as having three different facets. “Exploration in breadth” is the degree to which emerging adults are searching for different identity alternatives, while “exploration in depth” is the degree to which emerging adults evaluate the decisions to which they are already committed (Luyckx et al., 2006). The final facet, “ruminative exploration”, is a particularly interesting dimension because it is the dimension most highly correlated with negative outcomes. Ruminative exploration describes the degree to which emerging adults may get “stuck” in the
exploration process. The individual becomes overwhelmed and distressed by the decision-making process, and starts to dwell on many identity alternatives to ensure that he or she is making the “perfect” choice. Ruminative exploration is significantly correlated with psychological distress (Luyckx et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011), as well as neuroticism (Klimstra, Luyckx, Goossens, Teppers, & De Fruyt, 2013), depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low psychological well-being (Ritchie et al., 2013). Whereas the research presents a fairly consistent and intuitive picture of ruminative exploration and its outcomes, most of the existing literature is very recent and exploratory. Therefore, it is important to continue studying this relatively new construct and its effects on emerging adults.

Another important aspect of emerging adulthood is the process of individuation. Individuation is related to emerging adulthood in that it involves the issue of the emerging adult’s responsibility to develop an identity while maintaining a healthy relationship with his or her parents (Blos, 1962). Successful individuation occurs when an individual is able to express a unique identity while interacting with the people on whom his or her identity previously relied. The parent-child relationship is not replaced or terminated, but is instead transformed into a mature relationship between two adults (Josselson, 1980). Dysfunctional individuation is known to be associated with high levels of anxiety and depression, as well as low psychological adjustment (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993; McClanahan & Holmbeck, 1992).

An interesting, though scarcely studied area is the interaction between identity development and individuation. Intuitively, it seems reasonable to expect these two constructs to be highly related. However, little research has specifically studied the relationship between dysfunctional individuation and dysfunctional identity development (i.e., ruminative exploration). There is some evidence that parental promotion of independence mediates the
process of identity development (Quintana & Lapsley, 1990) and that low emotional independence, a construct similar to individuation, may lead to difficulties with identity exploration and commitment (Luyckx et al., 2006). Further research is needed to more firmly establish the relationship between dysfunctional individuation and ruminative exploration.

Whereas identity development and individuation have been clearly established as relevant constructs in emerging adulthood, there is less research looking into their interaction with parenting, and parental psychological control in particular. Research has shown that psychological control can impact both identity development and individuation. Luyckx et al. (2007) looked specifically at the relationship between psychological control and the dimensions of identity exploration and commitment. This study showed that psychological control is negatively associated with both commitment making and identity with commitment, but positively correlated with exploration in breadth. However, this study was performed before ruminative exploration had been established as another dimension of exploration, and therefore presents no information concerning the relationship between psychological control and this dysfunctional form of identity development. It is possible that the ruminative exploration dimension was captured in the measure of exploration in breadth, considering both are characterized by high levels of exploration of alternative identities. Furthermore, the intrapersonal aspects of perfectionism described by Soenens et al. (2005) seem conceptually related to ruminative exploration. Concern over mistakes and doubt about actions are two attributes of perfectionists that are also likely to be observed in individuals who are overly concerned with making the “perfect” identity choice. If ruminative exploration is conceptually similar to these perfectionistic qualities, and these qualities are positively correlated with psychological control, it may be reasonable to expect a similar positive relationship between ruminative exploration and
psychological control. However, further research is needed to establish an empirical basis for this relationship.

Parenting also plays an important role in the process of individuation. While the emerging adult is held accountable for the success of the individuation process, parents are able to promote successful individuation by encouraging their child to develop a unique identity while still making an effort to maintain a healthy parent-child relationship (Quintata & Laspley, 1990). The process of individuation is dependent on developing greater psychological separation from parents (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2012), which suggested that high levels of parental psychological control would inhibit the individuation process. Again, there is little research looking at the relationship between psychological control and individuation. An exception is the study done by Kins, Soenens, and Beyers (2012), which showed emerging adults with parents who are high in dependency-oriented and achievement-oriented psychological control show higher levels of dysfunctional dependence and dysfunctional independence, two indicators of dysfunctional individuation. While this study is relatively recent, it suggests that a positive relationship may be expected between high psychological control and dysfunctional individuation.

Although the literature suggests that parental psychological control would be related to dysfunctional identity development (i.e., ruminative exploration) and dysfunctional individuation, research involving these relationships is relatively recent and is still lacking in some areas. Furthermore, there is little research on the process by which parental psychological control leads to negative outcomes in emerging adulthood. It is possible that psychological control may not directly cause negative outcomes, but instead may lead to higher ruminative exploration and dysfunctional individuation, which in turn increase negative outcomes in
emerging adulthood (Figure 1). A similar model is presented in Soenens et al. (2005), where perfectionistic qualities, which seem to be conceptually similar to ruminative exploration, mediated the relationship between parental psychological control and depression. Therefore, there is value in exploring ruminative exploration and other potential mediational constructs to further explain the complex relationship between depression and psychological control.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the longitudinal relationship between parenting practices and important processes of emerging adulthood. In particular, it will focus on the ways in which parental psychological control relates to ruminative exploration and dysfunctional individuation, as well as the relationship of these three constructs with depression. It is hypothesized that ruminative exploration and dysfunctional individuation play a mediational role in the relationship between parental psychological control and depression. Finally, this study will supply research in areas where there are inconsistencies or little existing research, particularly in the areas of ruminative exploration and the effects of parental psychological control on successful individuation and identity development.

**Hypotheses**

A double mediation model is proposed wherein the relationship between parental psychological control and depression is mediated by ruminative exploration and dysfunctional individuation.
References


Figure 1. A mediational model of the interaction between psychological control, ruminative exploration, and dysfunctional individuation.