

TWO THEORIES OF PERSONAL UNIQUENESS

Comparing Two Subjective Theories of Personal Uniqueness

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Introduction

There is an emerging consensus that a subjective sense of personal uniqueness is a critical feature of personality development. However, there is no apparent consensus on how to conceptualize the role of personal uniqueness in personality or how to measure it. These two theories come to different perspectives on these questions (Demir et al., 2012; Aalsma et al., 2006).

Simsek and colleagues (Simsek & Yalınçetin, 2010; Demir et al., 2012) understand personal uniqueness as a positive indicator of authentic self-actualization. Their account of personal uniqueness emerges from humanistic positive psychology. They assert that subjective personal uniqueness contributes to positive indicators of mental health such as self-esteem, autonomy, and extraversion rather than negative indicators such as depression and neuroticism (Simsek & Yalınçetin, 2010). Moreover, Simsek and colleagues view personal uniqueness as an individual strength that underwrites non-contingent self-worth (Demir et al., 2010). In other words, a subjective sense of personal uniqueness drives a sense of self-esteem and feelings of personal worth. Simsek's research team has developed a single factor, 5-item scale (Personal Sense of Uniqueness, PSU) that appears to be reliable and construct valid. For example, the PSU scale shows a pattern of significant correlation with constructs such as optimism, agreeableness, self esteem, and other variables (Simsek, 2010).

On the other hand, Aalsma et al. (2006) draw upon a different research tradition in their conceptualization of personal uniqueness. In their view, subjective personal uniqueness is a kind of personal fable that emerges as a concomitant of the normative

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developmental challenge of separation-individuation. The goal of individuation is to become a separate and psychologically autonomous self in the context of ongoing relational commitments. According to object relations theory, adolescents manage the process of individuation by constructing several kinds of “personal fables”, including subjective invulnerability, omnipotence, and personal uniqueness (Lapsley, 1993). This research team constructed a 7-item single factor Personal Uniqueness Scale, PU. Research using the Personal Uniqueness scale has shown that these ideations are differentially related to adjustment outcomes. For example, while invulnerability does predict health risk behavior, it is also associated with some indices of positive adjustment (Hill, 2011). Similarly, subjective omnipotence is associated with a pervasive profile of positive adjustment. In contrast, a subjective sense of personal uniqueness has been associated with internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation) and counter-indicates indices of healthy adjustment.

Hence, personal uniqueness falls under two different interpretations, is derived from two different theoretical traditions, and is measured in two very different ways. The purpose of this project is to directly compare the two constructs for the first time. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between parental control and individuation in a sample of emerging adults and the role that personal uniqueness plays in this process. Each perspective on personal uniqueness has its own theoretical source - Simsek’s derives his measure from themes in the positive psychology literature. As such, he views personal uniqueness as a basic psychological need that contributes to happiness, self actualization, and other positive aspects of human development. In contrast, Lapsley understands personal uniqueness as an outcome of adolescent separation individuation

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that does not always have positive outcomes. For example, research in the Lapsley lab has shown that subjective sense of personal uniqueness is a robust predictor of internalizing symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, perhaps because someone who is utterly convinced of his or her subjective uniqueness may be unwilling to form the relational alliances that might otherwise buffer stress.

Parenthetically, Simsek views our approach to personal uniqueness as a way of investigating alienation (a claim that we will investigate elsewhere). Hence, we have a construct (subjective personal uniqueness) that is viewed very differently from the perspective of two very different theoretical traditions. One that comes out of positive psychology, the other that comes out of the literature on ego development.

The element of parenting will be measured in this study with the Parental Psychological Control Scale (Barber et. al., 2012) and the Parental Autonomy Support Scale (Soenens et. al., 2007) to identify intrusive parental control. Barber's team has identified various domains of parental psychological control, which include invalidating feelings, constraining verbal expressions, personal attack, and love withdrawal, all of which are included in their parsimonious 8-item scale. This scale has consistently been shown to predict disruptions in adolescent functioning across cultures, especially in self-appraisal and internalizing behaviors (Barber et. al., 2012). The Soenens et. al. Parental Autonomy Support Scale in contrast, is a measure of healthy separation-individuation from parents resulting in adaptive emotional development and positive developmental outcomes. Soenens defines autonomy as behaviors that are enacted with a sense of volition and self-determination, which is encouraged in a supportive, non-coercive family climate (Soenens et. al., 2007). It is important to distinguish that autonomy is not

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associated with distancing oneself from parents or acting in complete independence. Parental autonomy entails promotion of the child's expression, thinking, and decision-making (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Parental promotion of volitional functioning has shown to positively correlate with children's psychosocial adjustment at both middle and late adolescence (Soenens et. al., 2007).

Separation-individuation occurs when one establishes solid self-other boundaries that encourage autonomy, two stages of which are believed to occur in the lifetime- once during infancy and once during adolescence and young adulthood (Stey et. al., 2013). Poor separation-individuation is associated with many dysfunctional outcomes, such as insecure attachment (Lapsley & Edgerton, 2002), poor college adjustment (Mattanah et. al., 2004), and difficulties with identity development (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). In this study, separation-individuation will be measured by the Dysfunctional Individuation-Separation Scale (Stey et. al., 2013) and the Healthy Separation subscale from the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986). The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, and Tellegan, 1988), as well as several subscales from the College Adjustment Scales (Anton & Reed, 1991) will be evaluated as well to measure difficulties that may be encountered as a result of dysfunctional separation-individuation.

This study provides the first opportunity for direct comparison between the two opposing views of personal uniqueness and how this construct could serve as a moderating link in the relationship between parenting style and separation-individuation.

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Hypothesis

I test a hypothesis that the relationship between parental control and individuation is moderated by a sense of personal uniqueness. There are presently two ways of thinking about personal uniqueness in the psychological literature. One camp thinks of it as an indicator of authentic self-actualization, and therefore, as a contribution to positive psychology (Simsek & Yalınçetin, 2010). Another camp understands personal uniqueness as a construct bound up with the developmental challenge of separation-individuation (Lapsley, 1993). Each camp has developed its own measure of personal uniqueness and the extant literature suggests that these measures have divergent implications for mental health and adjustment. This project is the first direct comparisons of these two perspectives. Specifically, I hypothesize that Simsek's personal uniqueness scale is positively associated with healthy individuation (and negatively correlated with dysfunctional individuation), while the Aalsma et. al. scale of personal uniqueness is positively correlated with dysfunctional individuation (but negatively correlated with healthy individuation).

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