

Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation and Adaptation in Emerging Adulthood:



Tests of Mediational Hypotheses

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Background

The achievement of full psychological adulthood may depend on how well emerging adults negotiate the crucial developmental challenges of separation-individuation.

The successful resolution of separation-individuation and the achievement of felt psychological adulthood is not simply a matter of individual development but implicates the family system as well.

In well-differentiated families there is a calibration of parental control to encourage both connection and autonomy. In poorly differentiated families, individuation is typically seen as a betrayal of the family and hence parental control of it is excessive in these cases.

This project examined the relationship among parental control, dysfunctional individuation, and the perceived achievement of adult status, as well as indices of adjustment.

We hypothesized that the influence of parental control on perceived adulthood would be mediated by dysfunctional separation-individuation.

In addition, we provide evidence on the concurrent validity of a new measure of dysfunctional individuation, the Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation Scale (Lapsley, Aalsma, & Varshney, 2001).

Method

Participants: 115 (50 males) emerging adult ($M_{age} = 21.25$, $SD = 3.05$) university students.

Instruments:

Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation Scale. The DSIS ($\alpha = .91$) is a one-factor 19-item self-report that assesses difficulties in self-other differentiation, splitting of self-other representations into “good” and “bad”; and relationship disturbances (aloneness tolerance, coercion, object constancy)

Healthy Separation Scale. The 7-item subscale from Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence was used ($\alpha = .84$).

Parental Control Scale. The PCS is a 32-item scale that assesses perceived maternal ($\alpha = .82$), paternal ($\alpha = .84$) and dyadic parental ($\alpha = .70$) control and autonomy-granting.

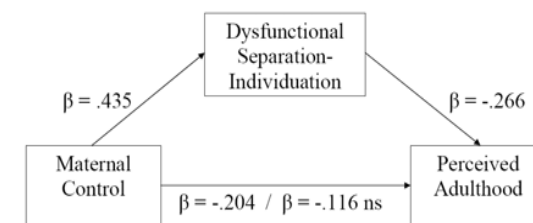
Perceived Adulthood. A one-item scale assessing subjective feelings of having achieved adulthood (“Do you think that you have reached adulthood?”) in one of three ways: “Yes”, “No”, “In some ways yes, in some ways no.”

Risk Behavior. Rowe’s (1985) 19-item measure of risk behavior (theft, vandalism fighting, speeding; $\alpha = .83$).

College Adjustment Problems. Subscales measuring Family Problems ($\alpha = .84$). Self-esteem Problems ($\alpha = .86$) and Interpersonal Problems ($\alpha = .84$) were used from the College Adjustment Scales.

Correlation Among Measures

	Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation	Healthy Separation	Parental Control			Perceived Adulthood	Risk Behavior	Adjustment Problems		
			Mother	Father	Both			Family	Self-Esteem	Interpersonal
Dys Sep. Ind.	1	-.446**	.470**	.496**	.232*	-.349**	.273**	.558**	.674**	.693**
Healthy Separation	.446**	1	.270**	.084	-.005	-.136	.007	.265**	.387**	.322**
Parental Control										
Mother	.470**	-.270**	1	.581**	.348**	-.274**	.223*	.586**	.415**	.467**
Father	.496**	-.084	.581**	1	.332**	-.136	.470**	.530**	.361**	.574**
Both	.232*	.005	.348**	.332**	1	-.095	.307	.153	.030	.209*
Perceived Adulthood	-.349**	.136	-.274**	-.136	-.095	1	-.096	-.221	-.356**	-.240*
Risk Behavior	.273**	-.007	.223*	.470**	.307**	-.096	1	.329**	.120	.415**
Adj. Problems										
Family	.558**	-.265**	.586**	.530**	.153	-.221*	.329**	1	.427**	.695**
Self-Esteem	.674**	-.387**	.415**	.361**	.030	-.356**	.120	.427**	1	.609**
Interpersonal	.693**	-.322**	.467**	.574**	.209*	-.240*	.415**	.695**	.609**	1



† All β -values were computed controlling for age and gender.

Results and Conclusions

- Maternal control, but not paternal control, predicted perceptions of adulthood.
- The more controlling mothers are, the less certain emerging adults are of achieving adulthood
- However, the relationship between maternal control and perceptions of adulthood is fully mediated by separation-individuation
- Individuation from mothers appears to be a stronger prerequisite of achieving full psychological adulthood than is individuation from fathers, although future research should examine this relationship within gender
- The DSIS was a robust predictor of risk behavior and family-, self-esteem-, and interpersonal problems
- DSIS was positively associated with high levels of maternal and paternal control, and negatively associated with healthy separation
- The DSIS showed encouraging evidence of discriminant and concurrent validity