Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation in Young Adolescents

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Background

Adolescent separation-individuation is a normative developmental challenge that requires adolescents to renegotiate self-other boundaries, differentiate the self from parental identifications and establish it on independent footing, but in the context of mutually-validating relationships (Josselson, 1988; Lapsley & Stey, in press). The goal of separation-individuation is "relational autonomy", whereby independence and self-governance are affirmed, but not at the expense of ongoing relational commitments.

Disturbances in separation-individuation have been associated with a range of clinically significant problems, yet assessment strategies have not kept pace with its growing importance as a construct that is crucial for understanding adolescent ego development.

The present study is the first to examine the construct validity of a promising measure of dysfunctional separation-individuation in a sample of young adolescents.

We examine patterns of convergent and discriminant validity and the relationship between dysfunctional individuation and early adolescent adjustment.

Dysfunctional individuation is hypothesized to converge with engulfment- and separation anxiety and dependency denial; and to counterindicate healthy separation.

Dysfunctional individuation should be differentially correlated with indices of positive (mastery coping, superior adjustment) and negative (depression) adjustment.

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Method

Participants: 296 (151 males) adolescent (M_{age} = 15.53, SD = 2.13) middle school and high school students.

Instruments:

Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation Scale. The DSIS is a one factor, 19-item scale that assesses difficulties in self-other differentiation, splitting and relational disturbances.

Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence. Four subscales from SITA were used to assess dimensions of adolescent separation-individuation reflective of Mahler's (1968) theory:

•Engulfment Anxiety (being overwhelmed by intimate relationships)

•Separation Anxiety (fear of abandonment and loss of attachment figure)

•Dependency Denial (rejection of interpersonal needs)

•Healthy Separation (balance of independence and dependence)

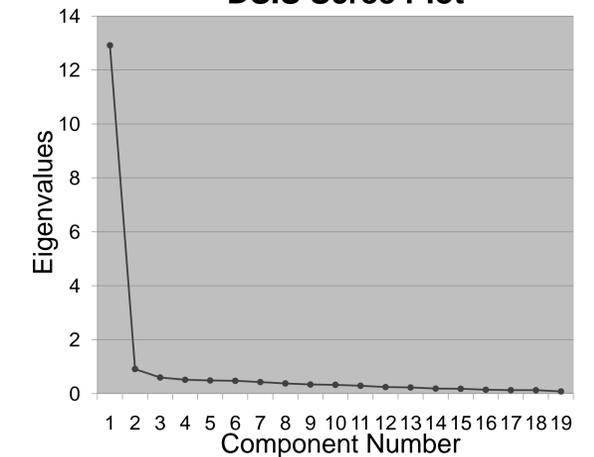Previous research has shown these subscales to be robust indicators of adjustment.

Self-Image Questionnaire for Young Adolescents. The Mastery and Coping and Superior Adjustment subscales of the SIQYA was used to measure positive adjustment

Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale. The RADS was designed to be a general measure of clinically relevant levels of depressive symptomatology in adolescents, and specifically for use as a screening measure for the identification of depression in school-based and clinical populations.

Scale Reliabilities

Scale	Scale Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Dysfunctional Separartion-Individuation Scale	72.62	49.48	.97
Engulfment Anxiety	22.66	8.13	.94
Separation Anxiety	34.70	12.84	.92
Dependency Denial	29.14	15.33	.97
Healthy Separation	24.85	8.63	.96
Mastery and Coping	41.20	10.41	.94
Superior Adjustment	43.30	10.07	.93
Reynold Adolescent Depression Scale	61.79	19.27	.96

DSIS Scree Plot

Results and Conclusions

• The DSIS is a one-factor scale with strong evidence of internal consistency in a sample of young adolescents.

•The DSIS converges with indices of engulfment and separation anxiety; and with dependency denial.

•The DSIS was negatively correlated with measures of healthy individuation.

•The DSIS is a strong predictor of depressive symptoms; and counterindicates coping and positive adjustment.

•These findings provide further evidence for the convergent and discriminant validity of the 19-item Dysfunctional Separation-Individuation Scale.

•Additionally, these findings illustrate the potential utility of the DSIS as a screening tool

Scale Correlations

	Dysfunctional Indivduation	Engulfment Anxiety	Separation Anxiety	Dependency Denial	Healthy Separation	Mastery and Coping	Superior Adjustment	Adolescent Depression
Dysfunctional Individuation	1	.520**	.624**	.798**	-.619**	-.736**	-.702**	.746**
Engulfment Anxiety	.520**	1	.626**	.648**	-.277**	-.527**	-.482**	.562**
Separation Anxiety	.624**	.626**	1	.653**	-.376**	-.573**	-.540**	.573**
Dependency Denial	.798**	.648**	.653**	1	-.689**	-.783**	-.793**	.737**
Healthy Separation	-.619**	-.277**	-.376**	-.689**	1	.682**	.719**	-.519**
Mastery and Coping	-.736**	-.527**	-.573**	-.783**	.682**	1	.884**	-.765**
Superior Adjustment	-.702**	-.482**	-.540**	-.793**	.719**	.884**	1	-.741**
Adolescent Depression	.746**	.562**	.573**	.737**	-.519**	-.765**	-.741**	1

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$