

Diverging Conceptions of Personal Uniqueness

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to examine conjointly the construct validity of two rival assessments of personal uniqueness. We also tested the claim that the Personal Uniqueness Scale (PUS) actually measures feelings of alienation. We have included measures for three general constructs: personal uniqueness, alienation, and positive/negative adjustment. This study examines the empirical relationship between two rival conceptions of personal uniqueness and its implications for successful adjustment. In a sample of 231 emerging adults (87 males and 144 females, *m* age = 19) from a private Midwestern university, the PUS positively correlated with negative outcomes and alienation while the PSU positively correlated with positive outcomes. Regression analyses found that the PUS and the Social Alienation Scale predicted similar negative and positive outcomes. These findings provide insight into differing theoretical understandings of personal uniqueness.

BACKGROUND

Most individuals have, or desire to have, a deeply felt conviction of their personal distinctiveness, individuality, and uniqueness. Yet, the study of personal uniqueness and its role in personality development has been slow to develop, particularly because of a lack of a suitable, construct valid assessment of subjective personal uniqueness. Two theoretical approaches have emerged, one is derived from the field of positive psychology and the other from adolescent ego development. From the perspective of positive psychology, personal uniqueness is a positive manifestation of self-actualization, but from ego development, personal uniqueness is a compensatory attitude or ideational tendency that accompanies the normative challenge of separation-individuation.

Şimşek and his colleagues (2010) argued that personal uniqueness is an important element of one’s sense of authenticity and self-actualization which is crucial for well-being, adjustment, and life satisfaction. Şimşek and colleagues constructed a five item Personal Sense of Uniqueness Scale (PSU) to assess this positive conception of personal uniqueness. Şimşek and Yalincetin (2010) found positive correlations with the PSU Scale and three scales: the Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver 1987), the Dispositional Hope Scale (Snyder et al. 1991), and the Ego-Resiliency Scale (Block & Kremen 1996).

In contrast to this more positive view, Lapsley and colleagues suggested that personal uniqueness emerges as a kind of personal fable that is constructed during the process of separation-individuation, which is a normative developmental challenge that first emerges in adolescence (Lapsley 1993; Lapsley & Rice 1988). Aalsma, Lapsley and Flannery (2006) showed that subjective personal uniqueness was a consistent predictor of internalizing symptoms, including depression and suicidal ideation. Further, Demir and Şimşek (2012) claim that this “adolescent personal uniqueness refers to feelings of loneliness and alienation.”

Hence, we have two scales that purport to measure subjective personal uniqueness but point in different directions with respect to (1) the theoretical source and (2) the implications for well-being and adjustment.

HYPOTHESES

The aim of this study was to compare two contrasting conceptions of personal uniqueness. We hypothesize that:

1. Lapsley’s Personal Uniqueness Scale (PUS) will correlate with negative outcomes.
2. Şimşek’s Personal Sense of Uniqueness (PSU) will correlate with positive outcomes.

We are also investigating Şimşek’s claim that the PUS measures alienation. Şimşek and colleagues (2012) claim that “adolescent personal uniqueness refers to feelings of loneliness and alienation.”

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METHOD

Participants: Participants were undergraduate or graduate students at a private Midwestern university. 87 men and 144 women were included in the sample. No minors were included in the sample.

Procedure: Participants were recruited through Psychology courses. Students were given course credit for their participation in the study. The study was conducted through an online survey.

Measures:

Personal Uniqueness and Alienation

- The Personal Uniqueness Scale (PUS) developed by Lapsley and colleagues measures personal uniqueness from an ego-developmental perspective.

- The Personal Sense of Uniqueness Scale (PSU) developed by Şimşek measures personal uniqueness from a positive psychology perspective.

- The Social Alienation Scale (Jessor, R., & Jessor, S. L. 1977) measures feelings of alienation.

Negative Outcomes and Positive Outcomes

- We are using four subscales from the College Adjustment Scales developed by Anton and Reed (1991). These include Self-Esteem Problems, Anxiety Problems, Depression Problems, and Interpersonal Problems.

- The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988) consists of two 10 item scales, one measuring positive affect and the other measuring negative affect. Each item is a word associated with an emotion or feeling.

- The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985) assesses global life satisfaction.

- The Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky and Lepper 1999) has been used by Şimşek in previous research showing a positive correlation with his PSU Scale. We include this scale in order to confirm that positive correlation and show a negative correlation with Lapsley’s PUS.

- Two subscales from The Self-Image Questionnaire for Young Adolescents (Petersen et al. 1984) target the positive developmental constructs ‘mastery and coping’ and ‘superior adjustment’ within an adolescent’s self-image.

RESULTS

Table 1. Correlation Matrix

Variable	M (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. PUS (Lapsley, <i>a</i> = .873)	18.29 (6.14)	1												
2. PSU (Şimşek, <i>a</i> = .774)	18.96 (3.24)	-.155*	1											
3. Alienation (<i>a</i> = .830)	46.52 (8.43)	.540**	-.409**	1										
4. Anxiety (<i>a</i> = .871)	21.48 (6.59)	.425**	-.269**	.569**	1									
5. Depression (<i>a</i> = .873)	17.53 (5.09)	.447**	-.270**	.565**	.746**	1								
6. Interpersonal Problems (<i>a</i> = .751)	19.83 (4.63)	.481**	-.219**	.668**	.631**	.710**	1							
7. Self Esteem Problems (<i>a</i> = .867)	21.08 (6.02)	.461**	-.500**	.682**	.737**	.755*	.614**	1						
8. Positive Affect (<i>a</i> = .898)	34.59 (7.19)	-.257**	.352**	-.431**	-.352**	-.412**	-.335**	-.478**	1					
9. Negative Affect (<i>a</i> = .899)	20.77 (7.42)	.354**	-.285**	.587**	.686**	.597**	.548**	.586**	-.233**	1				
10. Life Satisfaction (<i>a</i> = .856)	25.43 (6.21)	-.477**	.346**	-.558**	-.496**	-.558**	-.505**	-.625**	.486**	-.411**	1			
11. Subjective Happiness (<i>a</i> = .911)	19.88 (5.12)	-.427**	.431**	-.591**	-.564**	-.596**	-.509**	-.698**	.630**	-.494**	.592**	1		
12. Superior Adjustment (<i>a</i> = .717)	42.89 (6.71)	-.304**	.441**	-.501**	-.318**	-.391**	-.389**	-.466**	.581**	-.291**	.492**	.456**	1	
13. Mastery Coping (<i>a</i> = .699)	40.08 (9.01)	-.171**	.451**	-.468**	-.312**	-.310**	-.326**	-.441**	.422**	-.357**	.256**	.384**	.645**	1

p* < .05 *p* < .01

RESULTS CONTINUED

Table 2. Multivariate Multiple Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable	B (Standard Error) Personal Uniqueness	B (Standard Error) Social Alienation
Anxiety	.179** (.069)	.375*** (.05)
Depression	.167** (.053)	.275*** (.038)
Interpersonal Problems	.128** (.043)	.316*** (.032)
Self Esteem Problems	.128 (.056)	.436*** (.041)
Positive Affect	-.04 (.083)	-.351*** (.06)
Negative Affect	.063 (.077)	.491*** (.056)
Life Satisfaction	-.25*** (.064)	-.313*** (.047)
Subjective Happiness	-.127* (.052)	-.309*** (.038)
Superior Adjustment	-.051 (.074)	-.379*** (.054)
Mastery Coping	.17 (.101)	-.567*** (.074)

p* < .05 *p* < .01 ****p* < .001

DISCUSSION

- Our results support our first and second hypotheses, and thus an inverse relationship between the PUS and the PSU. For every positive correlation between the PUS and an outcome, the PSU shares a negative correlation and vice versa.

- This finding informs further research investigating how the different theoretical backgrounds have generated sharply contrasting measures of uniqueness.

- Further, multivariate multiple regression analysis showed that social alienation accounted for some variance for every outcome while Lapsley’s PUS accounted for less variance for only some dependent variables.

- Although their regression patterns are similar, these results demonstrate that adolescent personal uniqueness and social alienation are not identical.

- For future research, we will investigate the role of developmental processes such as dysfunctional or healthy separation-individuation as potential mediators between the PUS and PSU and positive/negative outcomes.

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