



Dysfunctional Individuation Predicts Spiritual and Religious Struggle in Emerging Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Emerging adulthood, a time of instability and growing autonomy, has been associated with a decline in religiosity and an increase in religious and spiritual (r/s) struggle. In this study we examine the relationship between r/s struggle and dysfunction in the normative developmental challenge of individuation, a question novel to the literature. A random sample of 788 emerging adults (61% female, *m* age = 19.5) from a private Midwestern university was assessed on indices of r/s struggle, dysfunctional individuation, perception of religious support from parents and peers, college adjustment (anxiety), spiritual quest orientation and spiritual growth mindset at three time points over the course of one school year. Latent growth curve models found that dysfunctional individuation was the most significant predictor of change in r/s struggle over time. These findings have implications for understanding the developmental sources of r/s struggle.

BACKGROUND

In this project we explored the relationship between **dysfunctional individuation** and **religious and spiritual (r/s) struggle** in emerging adulthood, a question novel to the literature.

Individuation is a normative developmental challenge that confronts adolescents with the task of renegotiating the hierarchical relationships with parents in the direction of increasing *relational autonomy*, where independence is affirmed in the context of connectedness (Lapsley & Stey, 2010). The developmental task of the emerging adult is to flexibly manage the ongoing tension between separation and connectedness, while avoiding the undesirable outcomes of fusion and enmeshment on the one hand, and complete detachment and isolation on the other. Disturbances in individuation predict a wide range of adjustment problems (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016).

Other studies have demonstrated that **spirituality and religious participation declines over emerging adulthood** (Denton, Pearce & Smith, 2008; Hall, Edwards & Wang, 2016). Developmental theory suggests that emerging adults may be moving from the religious posture assigned to them through parental socialization to one chosen as an autonomous, individuated self (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). Sorting out one's fundamental stance towards ultimate questions is not without difficulty, and the process of choosing a r/s identity may lead to an increase in r/s struggle, particularly if the process involves conflict with the religious orientation of one's family of origin. This may be indicated by a **relationship between dysfunctional individuation and r/s struggle**, particularly during the identity and worldview exploration common in college. Such a relationship would be particularly evident in the trajectory of r/s struggle over time, with healthy individuation precipitating a swift resolution of r/s struggles.

Extant research on r/s struggle has focused on **social, religious or cognitive factors** as a source of this struggle (e.g., Ano & Pargament, 2013; Razmyar & Reeve, 2013). To account for social and cognitive resources, we also examined the extent to which parent and peer religious support and a spiritual growth mindset might counter-indicate r/s struggle. A measure of *spiritual quest* was also included to assess the student's intentional engagement in the search for meaning and purpose in life, which might indicate a propensity to engage in r/s questioning (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2011). Finally, a measure of *anxiety* was used to differentiate dysfunctional individuation and r/s struggle from general distress.

HYPOTHESES

The aim of this study was to explore **whether dysfunctional individuation could predict r/s struggle** over time while controlling for time-invariant religious and social variables. We hypothesized that:

1. Parent and peer support would predict the slope of r/s struggle. Previous studies have found that parent and peer support are key predictors of religiosity and help to protect against r/s struggle.
2. Spiritual growth mindset would predict the slope of r/s struggle. A growth mindset would allow the emerging adult to navigate transitions with less distress, serving as a protective factor and thus lowering the likelihood of ongoing r/s struggle.
3. Dysfunctional individuation would predict the intercept and slope of r/s struggle. Unhealthy individuation would lead to distress in other areas of life, including religiosity and spirituality. We controlled for spiritual quest and college adjustment (anxiety) to demonstrate discriminative validity.

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METHOD

Participants: Participants were undergraduate students at a private Midwestern university. The sample was 71% Catholic, 13% Atheist/Agnostic, 12.8% Protestant and less than 5% Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu. Approximately 61% were female, and the mean age of the sample was 19.5 years old.

Procedures: Participants were randomly selected and received an email asking them to participate in a survey about their religious and spiritual life. Participants filled out the survey online as part of a larger study on religious and spiritual development in emerging adulthood.

Design: Participants were assessed at ten-week intervals. Wave 1 was collected in September, Wave 2 in December, and Wave 3 in April. Planned missingness was used in order to gather more information from the total sample and to ensure that missing values were Missing Completely at Random (MCAR). Missing values were estimated using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML). The latent trajectory of r/s struggle was determined using Latent Growth Curve (LGC) models, one using the LGC of dysfunctional individuation to predict the LGC of r/s struggle, and one that used dysfunctional individuation and a set of time-invariant covariates to predict the intercept and slope of r/s struggle.

Measures

- **Dysfunctional individuation** was measured using the *Dysfunctional Individuation Scale* to determine the presence of relational intimacy and identity issues (Stey et al., 2013). A high total score indicated the presence of the dysfunctional extremes of isolation or enmeshment.
- Six critical domains of **religious and spiritual struggle** were evaluated using the *Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale* (Exline and Pargament et al., 2014). These domains were divine struggle, demonic struggle, interpersonal struggle with religious persons or spiritual leaders, struggles to apply one's moral beliefs, questions regarding ultimate meaning, and religious doubt. A high total score indicated intense and multifaceted r/s struggle.
- The **perceived support of parents and peers for r/s development** was assessed using the *Parental Spiritual Support Scale* and a modified version of the Friends Spiritual Support Scale with one additional item. Maternal and paternal support were measured separately and combined into one index of parental support (Desrosiers et al., 2011).
- **Spiritual growth mindset** was gauged using a 6-item modified version of the *Theories of Intelligence Scale*. A high score indicated strong belief regarding the plasticity of spirituality and possibility of spiritual and intellectual growth (Dweck, 2008).
- Participants' **propensity for spiritual development** was quantified using a measure of *Spiritual Quest* (Astin 2011). The scale includes a focused assessment of interest in searching for meaning/purpose in life, finding answers to the mysteries of life, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Higher scores indicated a higher affinity for reflecting on these subjects.
- Aspects of **maladjustment to college** were measured using a subscale from the *College Adjustment Scale* that assessed anxiety. A high score indicated greater maladaptation (Anton & Reed, 1991).

RESULTS

Table 1
Latent Growth Curve Models Of R/S Struggle

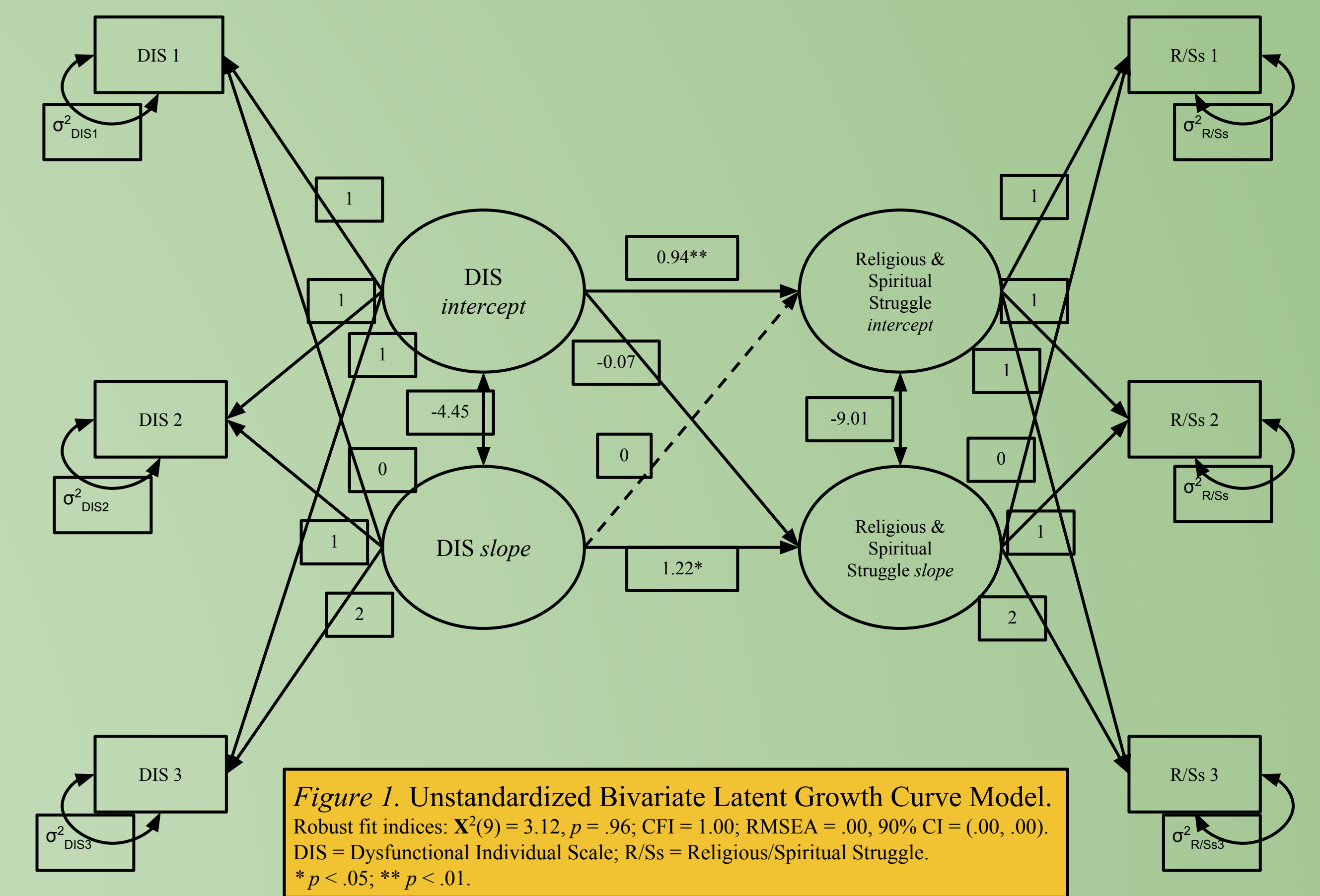
Model 1: LGC with covariates	Regression Coefficients		Robust Fit Indices
	R/S Struggle <i>intercept</i>	R/S Struggle <i>slope</i>	$X^2(34) = 168.72, p < .001; CFI = .85; RMSEA = .07, 90\% CI = (.06, .08)$
R/S struggle LGC	.47.87***	10.36	
Anxiety	.48**	-.14	
Parental Support	-.009	-.02	
Peer Support	.42	-.02	
Spiritual Mindset	.15	.17**	
Spiritual Quest	.22*	-0.06	
Dysfunctional Individuation <i>intercept</i>	.89***	-1.42	
Dysfunctional Individuation <i>slope</i>	N/A	51.57***	

Model 2: Bivariate LGC Model
 $X^2(9) = 3.12, p = .96; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00, 90\% CI = (.00, .00)$

R/S struggle LGC	48.03***	-.53
Dysfunctional Individuation <i>intercept</i>	.94***	-.07
Dysfunctional Individuation <i>slope</i>	N/A	1.21*

Note: * indicates $p < .05$, ** indicates $p < .01$, *** indicates $p < .001$.

MODEL



DISCUSSION

- **Developmental processes matter.** The developmental process of individuation demonstrated a stronger relationship with r/s struggle than social and religious factors. It significantly predicted r/s struggle over time, and the dysfunctional individuation model fit better than the covariate model.
 - Anxiety was a strong predictor of the intercept, or how much r/s struggle a person experienced, but it did not predict change in r/s struggle. In contrast, the LGC of dysfunctional individuation predicted both intercept and slope of r/s struggle.
 - Analysis of models using change in dysfunctional individuation to predict change in r/s struggle could demonstrate a causal (and not merely correlational) relationship. Our research team intends to analyze the full set of longitudinal data utilizing a bivariate latent change score model to assess whether changes in dysfunctional individuation precipitate changes in r/s struggle; i.e., whether the resolution of the process of individuation might also help an individual resolve r/s struggles.
 - Other developmental processes may also provide insight into the field of psychology of religion and spirituality, and addition of developmental variables may provide more predictive validity to current models exploring religiosity and spirituality, especially during developmental transitions.
- **Spiritual mindset.** Applying the growth mindset paradigm to r/s variables is novel to the literature and should be further explored.
 - Although a spiritual quest orientation was a significant predictor of the intercept, or one's amount of r/s struggle, a spiritual growth mindset significantly predicted the slope. More research is needed to elucidate the nature of this relationship and how a spiritual growth mindset might influence the trajectory of r/s struggle.
 - Since this is a new variable, further research should also explore its relationship to other religious and spiritual variables, especially variables related to religious coping.

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