CrossMark

Student personality traits predicting individuation in relation to mothers and fathers

Maja Zupančič [a], Tina Kavčič [b],*

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
[b] Faculty of Education, University of Primorska, Cankarjeva 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The role of personality traits in 674 emerging adult students' (aged 18 to 28; 80% female) individuation in relation to parents was investigated cross-sectionally. Self-reports were obtained by the Big Five Inventory and the Individuation Test for Emerging Adults. Personality was predictive of measures of individuation, over and above the students' background characteristics, suggesting that personality can be viewed as an inner resource shaping experiences of individuation. Agreeableness contributed to support seeking, and connectedness with both parents, and Extraversion predicted connectedness with mothers. Conscientiousness was related negatively to both perceptions of parental intrusiveness and fear of disappointing the mother, whereas Neuroticism was predictive of perceptions of maternal intrusiveness, and fear of disappointing the parents. Openness was associated with self-reliance in relationships with both parents, and demonstrated negative links with support seeking and connectedness with mothers. Few moderating effects of age and gender on Extraversion–individuation associations were revealed.

Introduction

According to the perspectives of separation–individuation (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), autonomy–relatedness (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986), and family systems (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974), the process of successful individuation in adolescence and beyond is characterized by an individual's gaining independence while maintaining connectedness to parents. Young people increase in their capacity to rely on themselves and to make independent decisions (Arnett, 2001; Blos, 1962; Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009) but within on-going close relationships with parents, which gradually restructure into non-hierarchical relationships between equal adults (Aquilino, 2006). Although individuation is considered to be a central developmental task of adolescence (Kruse & Walper, 2008; Puklek Levpušček, 2006; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), it extends over the twenties (Koepke & Denissen, 2012; Mayseless & Scharf, 2009; Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2004) – a period in contemporary post-modern societies often recognized as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to investigate how individuals' personality expresses itself in the context of parent–child relationships. Precisely, we focused on the contribution of emerging adult students' core features of personality to individual differences in their individuation within mother–child and father–child relationships. To our knowledge, the role of adolescent/emerging adult personality traits in parent–child relationships inherent to the individuation issues has not been

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: tina.kavcic@pef.upr.si (T. Kavčič).

documented to date. Albeit the research on individuation in emerging adulthood is currently increasing (e.g., Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013; Zupančič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpušček, 2012), previous work mainly considered the process and its correlates during adolescence. Also, the role of fathers still remains downplayed in research on parent–child relationships (Schofield et al., 2012).

Individuation in emerging adulthood

In contrast to individuation in infancy/toddlerhood, the second individuation arises in adolescence (Blos, 1967). By gradually restructuring infantile internal representations of their parents as the main source of support and approval of self, adolescents begin to rely more on their own internal resources and therefore develop a stable and independent psychological structure of self, a sense of individuality, and maturely connected relationships with parents (see Koepke & Denissen, 2012). However, the entry into emerging adulthood does not mean that individuation is completed (e.g., Buhl, 2008; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Masche, 2008; Mattanah et al., 2004; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013) as the passage to adulthood has become more prolonged and ambiguous than in the past (Arnett, 2000, 2001). The emerging adults thus tend to remain at least partially dependent on parental emotional, functional, and financial support.

While the process of individuation in adolescence is described by an increasing level of differentiation of self from parents, Tanner's model of recentering (2006) stresses that individuation in emerging adulthood deals more directly with balancing self-governance while maintaining mutually respectful relationships with parents. Separation issues (de-idealization of parents, affirmation of privacy, and emphasizing non-dependence on parents) decrease in importance (e.g., Koepke & Denissen, 2012; Puklek Levpušček, 2006), while emerging adults progress in identity development (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005) and lead a more independent life than adolescents (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Tanner et al., 2009). The behavioral independence in emerging adults is characterized by self-reliance and self-governance, which are different from unhealthy manifestations of independence such as detachment (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, & Beyers, 2013), and predict positive developmental outcomes (Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Zupančič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpušček, submitted for publication).

Although some distinction between individuation in adolescence and emerging adulthood is evident from the extant literature, research in emerging adulthood adopted or extended the key constructs of individuation that were operationalized and captured by measures originally created for adolescents (e.g., Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013; Zupančič et al., 2012; but see Koepke & Denissen, 2012; Komidar, Zupančič, Sočan, & Puklek Levpušček, in press; van Petegem et al., 2013). We targeted at five aspects of individuation from parents that were shown relevant particularly for emerging adults (Komidar et al., in press) since they closely reflect young peoples' increased competence across the domains of psychological functioning, restructured parent–child relationships, and changes in developmental ecology (Arnett, 2000; Tanner, 2006; Tanner et al., 2009).

The aspects of individuation under our inquiry included students' (i) experiences of connectedness (open and sincere communication with parents, mutual understanding, respect, and trust), (ii) seeking parental support (emotional support, approval, help, and advice), which resembles emotional dependence on parents but does not refer to excessive needs for emotional closeness/support of the parents, (iii) perceptions of parents as threatening an individual's sense of independence and selfhood (perceived parental intrusiveness into an individual's privacy, parental over-concern, worry, and desire for closeness and/or emotional control), (iv) an intrapersonal form of dependence on parents, which is conceptually similar to conflictual dependence (worry, anxiety, guilt, and resentment felt when an individual does not meet parental expectations; Hoffman, 1984), and (v) self-reliance (ability to manage personal affairs, problems, important decisions without parental assistance), conceived as an indicator of behavioral or functional independence. Even though our measure of self-reliance does not explicitly capture an individual's sense of volition or choice in parent–child relationships, which appears crucial for psychological adjustment (van Petegem et al., 2013), both self-reliance and connectedness to parents shared variance with positive outcomes in emerging adults, i.e. achieved criteria for adulthood and life satisfaction (Zupančič et al., submitted for publication).

The proposed role of emerging adults' personality traits in individuation

Given the importance of successful individuation from parents for healthy identity development (see Koepke & Denissen, 2012) and better emotional, social, and academic adjustment of young people (Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, & Palladino, 1991; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Mattanah et al., 2004; Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994), it is important to examine factors contributing to individuation issues in parent–child relationships. Factors such as age, gender, living situation, intimate relationship, parenting, and quality of attachment have been demonstrated to play a significant part in individuation (Barber, 2002; Buhl, 2008; Mattanah et al., 2004; Mayseless & Scharf, 2009; Zupančič et al., 2012). Although personality traits shape how people experience and respond to a wide variety of developmental tasks (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005) and social relationships, including parenting (Denissen, van Aken, & Dubas, 2009; de Haan, Deković, & Prinzie, 2012; Prinzie et al., 2004; Prinzie, Stams, Deković, Reijntjes, & Belsky, 2009), the role of adolescent/emerging adults' personality traits in individuation from parents has not been (to our knowledge) reported yet.

The traits as outlined by the Big Five model showed compelling links with various aspects of adjustment in adolescence (e.g., Klimstra, Akse, Halle, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2010; Slobodskaya, 2007), quality of parent–adolescent relationships