



Moving toward and away from others: Social orientations in emerging adulthood

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ABSTRACT

As emerging adults navigate numerous changes to their relationships, the ways in which they connect with and move away from others, or how they are socially oriented, may play an important role in their relational and individual well-being. The current study explored holistic types of social orientations (i.e., social motivations, the self in relation to others, other-directed emotions, and actual behaviors) and how they relate to the quality of close relationships, depression, and substance use in a sample of 787 US emerging adult college students. Results from latent profile analysis suggested five types of social orientations, each showing a distinct pattern of moving toward or away from others and links to varying degrees of relational and individual well-being. This study's consideration of multiple aspects of social orientations not only advances current theoretical models of social interaction, but also has important implications for understanding mechanisms that lead to flourishing and floundering in emerging adulthood.

Introduction

With the many transitions that can take place during emerging adulthood (e.g., leaving the parental home, entering college or workforce, developing romantic relationships), young people frequently face the challenge of navigating complex changes to their relationships and social interactions (Barry, Madsen, & DeGrace, 2016; Padilla-Walker, Memmott-Elison, & Nelson, 2017). Thus, researchers have recognized the importance of understanding how emerging adults connect with and relate to others (Bowker, Nelson, Markovic, & Luster, 2014; Nelson, 2013), as these connections have clear ties to relational and individual well-being (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). One of the primary lenses through which researchers have previously examined the extent to which individuals orient themselves toward or away from others is via social approach and avoidance motivations (Asendorpf, 1990). This model has made significant contributions to the field of social development, demonstrating the existence of various social subtypes and how they relate to well-being (see Coplan & Armer, 2007). However, recent work has challenged the idea that types of sociality can be fully captured by social motivations alone (Bowker, Stotsky, & Etkin, 2017), suggesting that there may be other important factors that influence how people are oriented toward or away from others.

In this paper, the term “social orientations” is proposed to represent a broad and holistic way of understanding the various ways in which

emerging adults might move toward or away from others. Specifically, in addition to social motivations, how people view the self in relation to others, how people feel and think about others, and how people behave socially have yet to be explored together as aspects of social orientations. Therefore, the overall aim of this study was to present social orientations as a meaningful construct for understanding social adjustment and well-being in emerging adulthood. To accomplish this, the first purpose of the study was to employ a person-centered analysis (i.e., latent profile analysis) to examine variations in the extent to which individuals orient themselves toward or away from others in their social motivations, self-processes in relation to others, other-directed emotions, and actual social behaviors via latent profile analysis. The second purpose of this study was then to determine the extent to which social-orientation groups differed on indices of relational (i.e., relationship quality with best friends, romantic partners, and parents) and individual well-being (i.e., depression and substance use). Because no known study has taken a holistic approach to studying social orientations, a secondary aim of this study was to advance theory by synthesizing several related areas of research under the label of social orientations.

The importance of social orientations in emerging adulthood

The transition from adolescence to adulthood presents a truly

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unique time period in terms of how the self relates to others. On the one hand, emerging adults become more independent and experience increased autonomy in their life choices, including when and how they will interact with others (e.g., social lifestyle, type of education/career, living alone or with roommates, etc.). On the other hand, they also face increased exposure to novel social environments and interactions with new people that are often beyond their control (e.g., coworkers, roommates, classmates, etc.). Thus, emerging adults must make choices about how to navigate complex developmental changes in the nature of their relationships with others, including choices about maintaining old relationships and establishing new ones. Of course, with increased independence, they are also presented with the opportunity to move away from others by not maintaining or pursuing relationships. Although the extent to which they move toward or away from others is more within their control than ever before, the consequences of those choices (e.g., choosing not to engage in social settings such as work or school) may be greater than ever before as well. Indeed, they may be predictive of various aspects of flourishing (e.g., healthy relationships with others, positive mental health) and floundering (e.g., internalizing problems such as depression, externalizing problems such as risky substance use) in emerging adulthood (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). In sum, there is a need to better examine social orientations (i.e., the various processes that underlie choices to move toward and away from others) in emerging adults, as they may have significant implications for individual and relational well-being in the third decade of life.

Social orientations can offer a new approach to understanding relationships in emerging adulthood. Most previous research on this topic has focused on factors such as formation processes (i.e., similarities that bring people together) and relationship qualities (e.g., intimacy, commitment, conflict; Barry et al., 2016; Shulman & Connolly, 2016), but there has been less attention given to individual differences that might precede both the formation and quality of these relationships. In other words, the extent to which one simply engages in social interactions (i.e., a precursor to forming relationships) needs greater examination in emerging adulthood. A deeper understanding of social orientations may provide meaningful insight into some of these individual differences. For example, some orientations may promote more social interactions and, in turn, the formation of more and better-quality relationships than other orientations. Additionally, once relationships form, social orientations may then act as a personal characteristic that promotes (e.g., balances the self and others) or inhibits (e.g., creates dependence on others) healthy relational functioning.

Taken together, neither studies of the self nor studies of relationships alone can capture an important aspect of emerging adults' social lives. Given that emerging adults' choices to interact or not may be a precursor to so many aspects of flourishing or floundering, it would be important to examine how individuals see themselves in relation to others or, in other words, to examine the various ways in which individuals (i.e., the self) think, feel, and behave in relation to others. As such, if individuals differ in their social orientations toward or away from others, they should also differ in indices of flourishing and floundering at relational and individual levels. Previous research suggests that this may indeed be the case. For example, social motivations that orient people away from others are related to peer and relational problems (Bowker et al., 2014) and depression (Nelson, 2013). Overinvolvement of others in self-evaluations is related to relationship insecurity (Fitzsimons & Anderson, 2013), anxiety and depression (Harter, 2012), and increased susceptibility to social pressures, which can include negative behaviors such as substance use (Litt, Stock, & Gibbons, 2015). Although these studies each only addressed one aspect of social orientations, they do offer initial evidence that social orientations may be able to predict relational and individual well-being in emerging adults. In summary, gaining a deeper understanding of how emerging adults are socially oriented may help uncover more reasons why some flourish and some flounder in the third decade of life, which can have important implications not only for the immediate lives of

emerging adults, but also for laying foundations for success as they transition into adulthood.

Theoretical challenges: social motivations and social withdrawal

In order to more fully understand social orientations, however, there are several challenges with existing theoretical and methodological approaches that must first be addressed. One of the primary ways researchers have previously examined social orientations is the social motivations model (Asendorpf, 1990). This model describes several states according to individuals' internal motivations to approach and avoid social interaction, namely sociability (high approach, low avoidance), shyness (high approach, high avoidance), avoidance (low approach, high avoidance), and unsociability (low approach, low avoidance). These states reflect several cognitive (i.e., preferences for social interaction or solitude) and emotional (e.g., enjoyment, fear, anxiety) processes that relate to how individuals are oriented toward others. These processes, albeit limited, have been useful for both identifying certain types of social orientations and demonstrating how these orientations are differentially associated with indices of well-being. In emerging adulthood, shy and avoidant individuals have been shown to be prone to myriad individual and relational challenges (e.g., internalizing problems, low relationship quality; Nelson, 2013). On the other hand, unsociable individuals tend to suffer from far fewer problems, but are still prone to some psychological and health difficulties (i.e., depression and emotional eating; Etkin, Bowker, & Scalco, 2016; Nelson, 2013). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that emerging adults who are oriented away from others may struggle with both individual and relational well-being, although the degree of these struggles may vary based on individual differences in cognitive and emotional social processes. Thus, social motivations provide a good starting point for understanding overall social orientations, but several shortcomings of this model merit a deeper exploration of other factors that may contribute to social orientations.

First, although the social motivations model can potentially explain reasons for both social engagement and withdrawal, its primary focus has been withdrawal. In other words, there has been much exploration of individual differences in cognitive and emotional processes that lead people away from others, but little inquiry into similar factors that might lead them toward others. Given the social nature of human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and that most emerging adults tend to not be socially withdrawn (Nelson, 2013), an attempt to capture overall social orientations requires consideration of both withdrawal and engagement. Second, motivations offer only a narrow view of the vast cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that contribute to how one is oriented toward or away from others. Specifically, past research has demonstrated that in addition to social motivations, several factors contribute to social orientations and predict indices of well-being. These include how people view the self in relation to others, additional other-directed emotions, and actual social behaviors. In the past, however, these have been analyzed separately, and no known study has considered these together as components of overall social orientations.

Furthermore, most previous research has employed variable-centered analyses (e.g., shyness is associated with depression; Etkin et al., 2016). Although these types of findings offer insight into social characteristics that are associated with well-being outcomes, they fail to consider that social orientations may be better conceptualized as patterns across a number of social characteristics rather than simply the social variables themselves. To this end, there have been some person-centered analyses aimed at identifying distinct types of sociality across more than one variable. For example, rather than treat shyness and sociability as conflicting constructs, Cheek and Buss (1981) recognized that some people can be both shy and sociable, and created four distinct groups based on these variables: shy-sociable, shy-unsociable, unshy-sociable, and unshy-unsociable. Other studies, based on the social motivations model, separated individuals into shy, avoidant, and

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