

3-2014

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Citation Details

Lane, Joel A. and Elghoroury, Dena, "Counseling College Seniors Through the Transition Out of College: Applying Theory and Research to Practice" (2014). *Counselor Education Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 32.

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Counseling College Seniors Through the Transition Out of College: Applying Theory and Research to Practice

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Source

Lane, J. A. (in press). Attachment, well-being, and college senior concerns regarding the transition out of college. *Journal of College Counseling*.



Overview

- Leaving college is a significant life transition with important psychological implications, but it has received little empirical attention
- This study examined the relationships among attachment, psychological well-being (PWB), life satisfaction, and concerns about the transition out of college among a sample of college seniors



The Transition Out of College

- The senior year of college represents a significant transition, during which individuals prepare to leave behind the freedom of the college experience and to assume ownership of adult roles (Hunter, Keup, Kinzie, & Maietta, 2012).
 - Anxiety due to not being able to anticipate coming changes in priorities (Overton-Healy, 2010)
 - fearing the unknown and the pressures of developing career plans and becoming financially independent (Yazedjian, Kielaszek, & Toews, 2010)
 - unanticipated transitions, such as losing the structure afforded by the student lifestyle, leaving behind social networks, and feeling pressured by societal expectations (Lane, 2013b)



Transitions in Emerging Adulthood

- Societal phenomenon of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004)
- Life transitions in emerging adulthood have important implications for well-being and mental health (Lane, 2013, 2014)
- While many emerging adults are able to seamlessly progress through the numerous life and role changes, others experience identity crisis and distress in response to these changes (Lee & Gramotnev, 2007; Weiss, Freund, & Wiese, 2012)



Transitions & Attachment

- First year of college:
 - social competence (Wei et al., 2005)
 - assertiveness (Kenny, 1987)
 - feeling supported in times of stress (Kenny, 1987)
 - separation-individuation (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004)
- Attachment, social support, and PWB during life transition in emerging adulthood (Lane, 2014)



Attachment Theory

- Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) contends that the relationships we develop with caregivers beginning in infancy inform our attitudes toward help-seeking and new learning in times of distress across the lifespan
- Attachment strategies are theorized to become activated during times of distress (Fraley & Davis, 1997), thereby impacting one's ability to positively resolve the distressing situation and, ultimately, influencing well-being



Theoretical Role of Attachment in College Graduation

- Attachment is self-reinforcing:
- Negative beliefs regarding self and/or other are activated during times of transition, diminishing one's ability to effectively cope with the stress of the transition and reinforcing the negative attachment feelings (Fraley & Davis, 1997)
- The impact of attachment in the freshmen year could continue to impact student development, culminating in the senior year
- Plausible relationships: Attachment -> well-being -> feelings about transition out of college



Present Study

- This study examined the roles of attachment, PWB, and life satisfaction in attitudes regarding the transition out of college
 - Hypothesis 1: Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance would be negatively related to psychological well-being and life satisfaction, and positively related to the various domains of graduation-related concerns
 - Hypothesis 2: Life satisfaction would mediate the relationships between the attachment dimensions and the graduation-related concerns
 - Hypothesis 3: Personal well-being would mediate the relationships between the attachment dimensions and life satisfaction

Method

- **Participants**

- $N = 182$
- Traditional-aged (20 to 29 years) college seniors
 - Psychology ($n = 90$) and Education ($n = 92$) majors
 - Predominantly White (90.7%) and female (79.7%)

- **Instruments**

- Attachment = Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form (Wei et al., 2007)
- PWB = World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index (Bech et al., 2003)
- Life Satisfaction = Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)
- Graduation-Related Concerns = Senior Concerns Survey- Short Form (Taub et al., 2006)
 - Career, Change & Loss, Support

- **Data Analysis**

- Path analysis
- Bias-corrected bootstrap analysis for mediation effects



Results

- Controlled for age and gender:
 - Being male was associated with higher avoidance
 - Age was negatively associated with change and loss related concerns
- Direct effects:
 - Attachment anxiety avoidance predicted PWB and life satisfaction, as predicted
 - Attachment anxiety predicted career related concerns, change and loss related concerns and support related concerns
 - Attachment avoidance, however, only significantly predicted change and loss related concerns, but not the other graduation concern variables

Results

Mediation Model Analysis

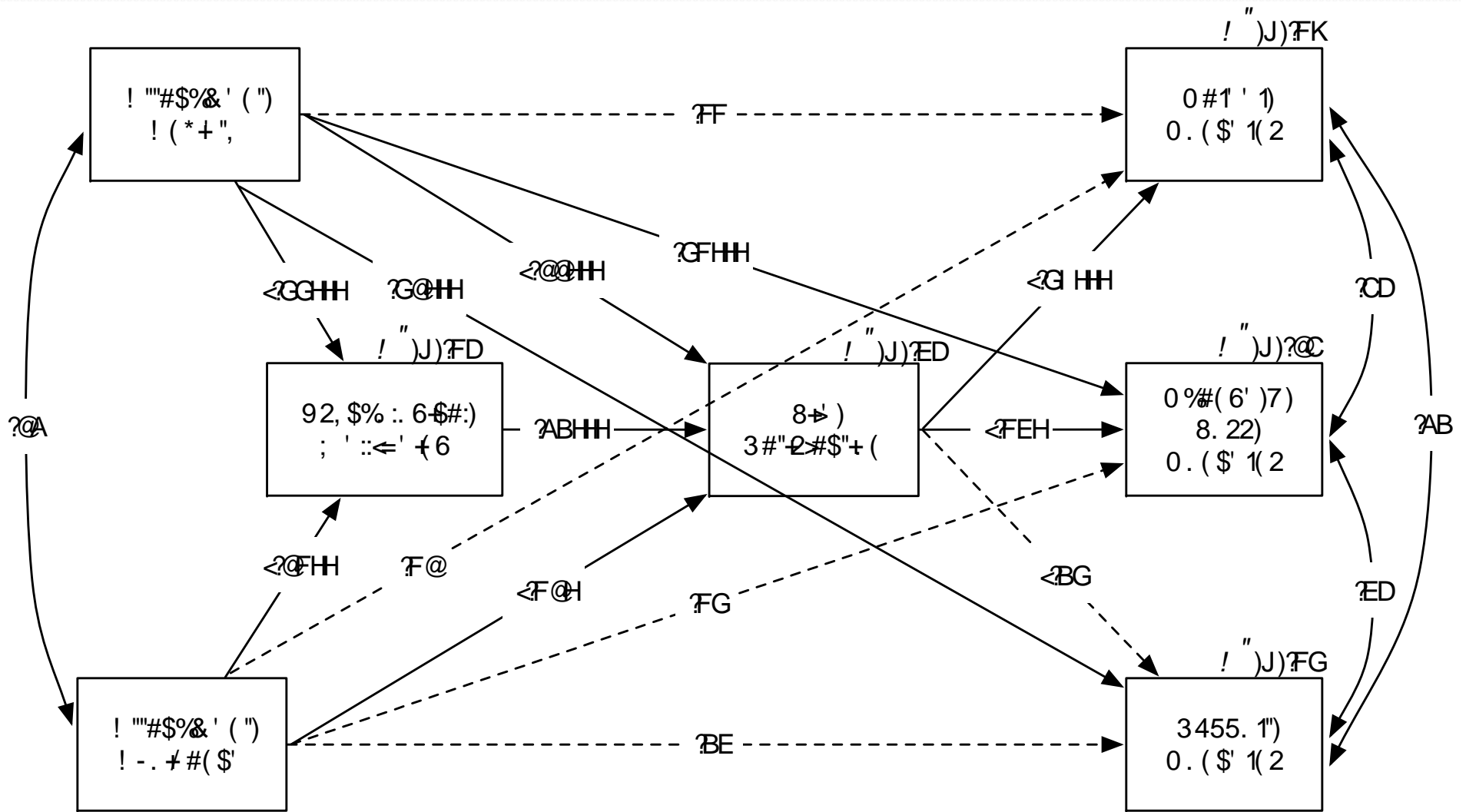
Significant mediation effects:

- Attachment anxiety -> life satisfaction -> career concerns
- Attachment avoidance -> life satisfaction -> career concerns
- Attachment anxiety -> life satisfaction -> change & loss concerns
- Attachment avoidance -> life satisfaction -> change & loss concerns
- Attachment anxiety -> PWB -> life satisfaction
- Attachment avoidance -> PWB -> life satisfaction
- PWB -> life satisfaction -> career concerns

Bootstrap Analysis of Magnitude and Statistical Significance of Indirect Effects

Independent Variable	Mediator Variable	Dependent Variable	β (standardized path coefficient and product)	Mean indirect effect (B) ^a	SE of mean ^a	95% confidence interval for mean indirect effect ^a
Indirect effects hypothesized to be statistically significant						
Anxiety	→ SWLS	→ Career	$(-.23) \times (-.34) = .080$ ¹	.068	.025	.029 to .130***
Anxiety	→ SWLS	→ Loss	$(-.23) \times (-.14) = .034$ ¹	.027	.017	.001 to .070*
Anxiety	→ SWLS	→ Support	$(-.23) \times (-.03) = .007$ ¹	.010	.015	-.021 to .040
Avoidance	→ SWLS	→ Career	$(-.14) \times (-.34) = .046$ ¹	.039	.017	.010 to .080**
Avoidance	→ SWLS	→ Loss	$(-.14) \times (-.14) = .019$ ¹	.015	.011	.000 to .044*
Avoidance	→ SWLS	→ Support	$(-.14) \times (-.03) = .004$ ¹	.003	.009	-.012 to .024
Anxiety	→ PWB	→ SWLS	$(-.33) \times (.60) = -.198$ ²	-.218	.054	-.332 to -.121***
Avoidance	→ PWB	→ SWLS	$(-.21) \times (.60) = -.127$ ²	-.136	.044	-.224 to -.052**
Indirect effects not hypothesized to be statistically significant						
PWB	→ SWLS	→ Career	$(.60) \times (-.34) = -.221$ ²	-.062	.016	-.094 to -.033***
PWB	→ SWLS	→ Loss	$(.60) \times (-.14) = -.092$ ²	-.024	.013	-.051 to .064
PWB	→ SWLS	→ Support	$(.60) \times (-.03) = -.020$ ²	-.005	.013	-.030 to .021

Note: SWLS = life satisfaction, PWB = psychological well-being, Career = career related concerns, Loss = change and loss related concerns, Support = support related concerns. ^a Values based on unstandardized coefficients. ¹ estimated by testing Model b, ² estimated by testing Model c. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.



Final model. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant parameters. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.



Discussion

- Present findings support the contention that attachment security is a key element in the degree of distress college seniors feel toward the transition out of college.
 - Life satisfaction significantly mediated the relationships of attachment anxiety and avoidance on two of the domains of graduation concern (i.e., career concerns and change and loss concerns), but did not mediate their respective impacts on support concerns.
 - PWB significantly mediated the relationships of each attachment variable on life satisfaction.
- Strongest relationships to PWB and life satisfaction were found with career-related and loss-related graduation concerns, suggesting that college senior well-being is moderately tied to these aspects of the transition



Limitations

- Cross-sectional, non-experimental research design.
- Demographics of the sample
- Participants primarily majoring in Psychology and Education
- Mono-method (self report)



Counseling Implications

- Based on findings, attachment theory seems to provide conceptual insights regarding the graduation transition
- Seniors with elevated attachment anxiety reported higher career-related, loss-related, and support-related graduation concerns, while those with elevated attachment avoidance reported higher loss-related graduation concerns



Counseling Implications

- Given that attachment anxiety equates to negative beliefs regarding self (Brennan et al., 1998), counselors working with distressed seniors could attempt to strengthen self-concept as a means of resolving graduation concerns
- Attachment avoidance equates to negative beliefs regarding other, so counselors should seek interventions that target utilization of external support resources
- The corrective attachment experience afforded by the therapeutic relationship may help resolve insecure attachments and, therefore, may also help resolve concerns about leaving college



Counseling Implications

Lane, J. A. (2013). Group counseling for students transitioning out of postsecondary education: A narrative approach. *Groupwork: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Working With Groups*, 23(1), 34-55. doi:10.1921/1501230103



Implications for Future Research

- Use more representative sample when confirming findings
- Test additional mediating factors in the present model as a means of further understanding the model's associations
- Consider the refinement of the SC-S given that present study could only utilize three of four subscales.