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COUNSELING EMERGING ADULTS IN THE MIDST OF LIFE TRANSITION: APPLYING THEORY AND RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

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Problem Statement



- Emerging adulthood is a life period marked with many significant transitions
- Evidence that these transitions are critical periods for well-being & psychological distress
- Emerging adulthood represents elevated mental health risk, impulsivity, & risk-taking behaviors
- Imperative for counselors to better understand factors that promote well-being among emerging adults

Emerging Adulthood

- (Arnett, 2000; 2001; 2004): Distinct developmental stage occurring from the late teens through much of the twenties
- Changing social conditions have resulted in delayed developmental progressions into adulthood
- Emerging adults: not quite adolescents, not quite adults

| (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) | 1970 | Present |
|------------------------------------|------|---------|
| Avg. Age of Marriage- Female | 20 | 26 |
| Avg. Age of Marriage- Male | 22 | 28 |
| Avg. Age of Parenthood | 21 | 25 |

Distinguishing Characteristics



- Demographic Instability
 - ▣ Leaving home
 - ▣ Career turnover
- Subjective Definitions of Adulthood
- Extended Identity Exploration

Emerging Adulthood & Transition



Extended identity exploration creates critical period for well-being during normative transitions

Common EA transitions:

- High school graduation (Gore & Aseltine, 2003)
- Leaving home (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006)
- Entering college (Kenny & Sirin, 2006)
- Leaving college (Yazedjian et al., 2010)
- Professional life (Polach, 2004)

Attachment



- Bowlby (1969/1982): Early relationships we develop with our caregivers inform our expectations of self and others
- These expectations influence and are influenced by relational experiences throughout lifespan
- Adult Attachment: Anxiety & Avoidance
- Attachment strategies are 'activated' in times of distress

Social Support



- Healthy social relationships mitigate stress (Coble, Gantt, & Mallinckrodt, 1996)
- Perceptions of social support more important than actual support (Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986)
- Social support in emerging adulthood

Well-Being



- Subjective vs. Psychological Well-Being (Lent, 2004)
 - Subjective: Happiness & Life Satisfaction
 - Psychological: Mental Health & Functioning
- Research limitations:
 - Distinguishing subjective from psychological
 - Focusing on “negative well-being” (e.g., psychological distress)
- Most research has defined “well-being” as the absence of psychological symptoms, instead of the presence of positive qualities

Limitations of Existing Literature



- Attachment, social support, and aspects of well-being have only been examined among adult populations in general
- Existing emerging adult research has examined attachment *or* social support, not both
- Concerns regarding previous well-being research:
 - Lack of theoretical rationale for choice of well-being constructs
 - Over-focus on negative aspects of well-being (distress, depression, anxiety, etc.)
- The true impact of attachment and social support on the full spectrum of well-being remain untested

Research Questions & Hypotheses

Research Questions

Among emerging adults experiencing one or more life transitions:

- Does attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance directly and negatively predict subjective well-being?
- Does attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance directly and negatively predict psychological well-being?
- Does social support directly and positively predict subjective and psychological well-being?
- Does social support mediate the relationships between both types of attachment and both types of well-being?
- Is mediation model best-fitting model?

Hypotheses

- Comparatively high attachment anxiety will be directly and negatively related to subjective and psychological well-being.
- Comparatively high attachment avoidance will be directly and negatively related to subjective and psychological well-being.
- Social support will be directly and positively related to subjective and psychological well-being.
- Social support will fully mediate the relationships between both types of attachment and both types of well-being.
- Mediation model will fit data better than alternative models.

Research Design



- Cross-sectional, non-experimental survey design
- Survey took approx. 20-30 minutes to complete
- **Demographics** (Age/Gender/Ethnicity, Transition status)
- **Attachment:** Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form (12 items)
- **Social Support:** Social Support Questionnaire (6 items)
- **Subjective Well-Being:** Satisfaction with Life Scale (5 items), Positive & Negative Affect Schedule (20 items)
- **Psychological Well-Being:** Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (42 items)

Participants

- 213 emerging adults (18- to 29-year-olds)
 - Mean age: 22.93
 - 72.3% female
 - 83.1% white
 - 87.3% enrolled in college full time after high school
 - Mix of college attendees & graduates, & EA's who never attended college

- Reported transitions: high school graduation, FYE, Final semester of college, post-graduation, professional life, marriage, childbirth, Moving out of state/country, “quarter life crisis”

Data Analysis



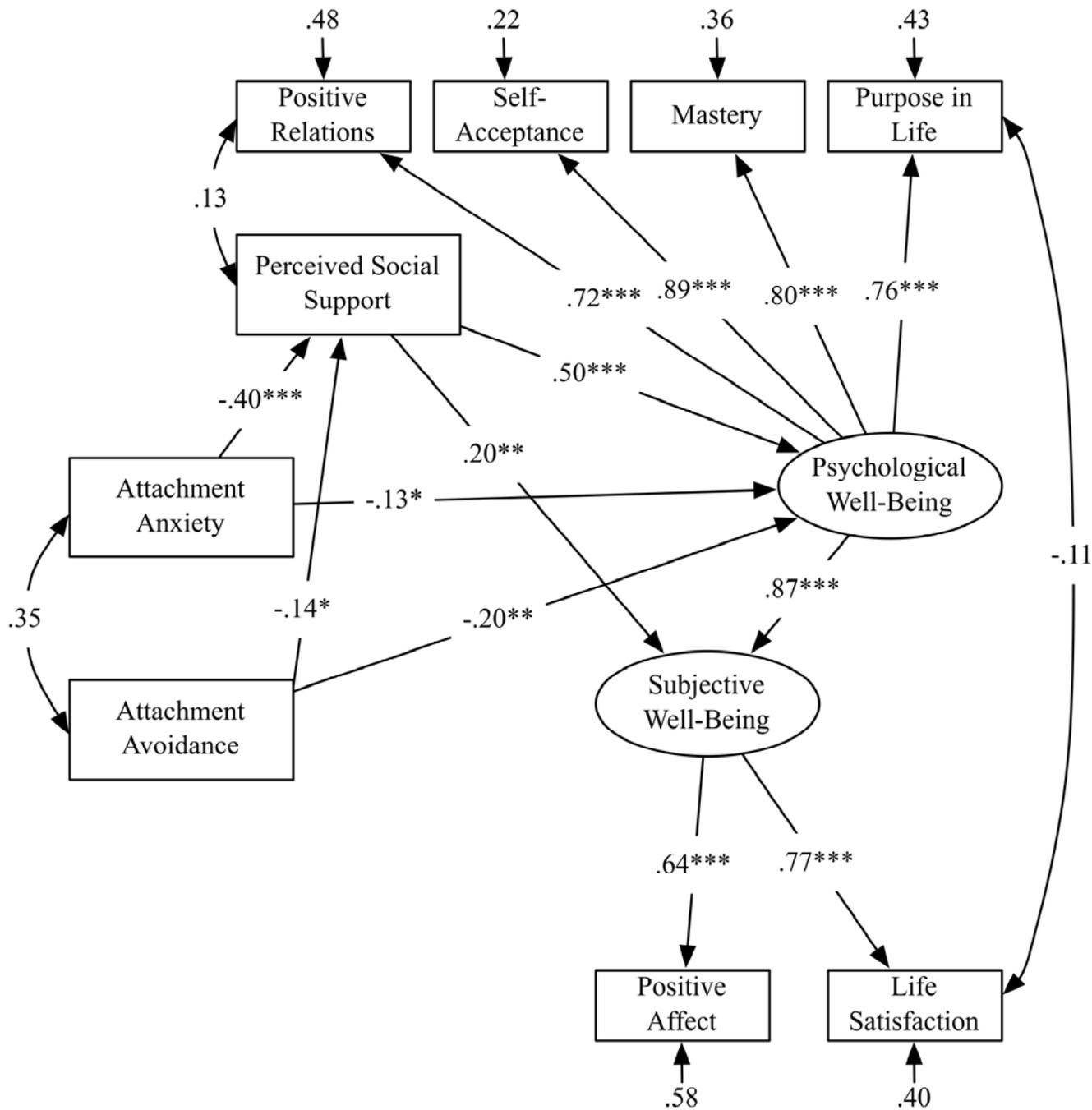
- Structural Equation Modeling
 - Allows for confirming complex sets of relationships
 - Tests for indirect (e.g., mediation) effects while accounting for measurement error
 - Assesses model fit
- Theoretical mediation model:
 - Independent, observed variables: attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, perceived social support
 - Dependent, latent variables: subjective well-being, psychological well-being

Results

- Subjective well-being:
 - Negatively predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta = -.37, p < .001$) & attachment avoidance ($\beta = -.24, p < .01$)
 - Positively predicted by social support ($\beta = .68, p < .001$)

- Psychological well-being:
 - Negatively predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta = -.33, p < .001$) and attachment avoidance ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$)
 - Positively predicted by social support ($\beta = .59, p < .001$)

- Attachment anxiety \rightarrow Social support \rightarrow Sub. WB: $B = -.157, p < .001$
- Attachment avoidance \rightarrow Social support \rightarrow Sub. WB: $B = -.082, p < .05$
- Attachment anxiety \rightarrow Social support \rightarrow Psy. WB: $B = -.142, p < .001$
- Attachment avoidance \rightarrow Social support \rightarrow Psy WB: $B = -.074, p < .05$



Model fit: ($\chi^2 [20] = 29.46, p = .079; RMSEA = .047; CFI = .995; PNFI = .547$)

Practical Applications



- For theory:
 - Social support explains relationship of attachment on well-being for emerging adults in transition
 - Is happiness a byproduct of psychological health?
- For counselors:
 - Importance of interpersonal functioning & developing supportive relationships for emerging adults
 - Anticipate attachment anxiety & avoidance barriers with clients (cf. Daly & Mallinckrodt, 2009; Mallinckrodt, 2000)