Counseling Emerging Adults in the Midst of Life Transition: Applying Theory and Research to Practice

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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)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>Present</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Age of Marriage- Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Age of Marriage- Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Age of Parenthood</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
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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 ($\beta = -0.37, \ p < .001$) & attachment avoidance ($\beta = -0.24, \ p < .01$)
  - Positively predicted by social support ($\beta = 0.68, \ p < .001$)

- **Psychological well-being:**
  - Negatively predicted by attachment anxiety ($\beta = -0.33, \ p < .001$) and attachment avoidance ($\beta = -0.29, \ p < .001$)
  - Positively predicted by social support ($\beta = 0.59, \ p < .001$)

- Attachment anxiety $\rightarrow$ Social support $\rightarrow$ Sub. WB: $B = -0.157, \ p < .001$
- Attachment avoidance $\rightarrow$ Social support $\rightarrow$ Sub. WB: $B = -0.082, \ p < .05$
- Attachment anxiety $\rightarrow$ Social support $\rightarrow$ Psy. WB: $B = -0.142, \ p < .001$
- Attachment avoidance $\rightarrow$ Social support $\rightarrow$ Psy WB: $B = -0.074, \ p < .05$
Model fit: \( \chi^2 [20] = 29.46, p = .079; \text{RMSEA} = .047; \text{CFI} = .995; \text{PNFI} = .547 \)
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)