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## Individuation in Slovene emerging adults: Its associations with demographics, transitional markers, achieved criteria for adulthood, and life satisfaction



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### ABSTRACT

The study investigated associations of Slovene emerging adults' age, gender, living situation, romantic relationship, and employment status with aspects of individuation in relation to mother and father. Controlling for demographic variables and transitional markers of adulthood, we further explored the contribution of individuation measures to individuals' perceptions of achieved criteria for adulthood and life satisfaction. The participants provided self-reports on the Individuation Test for Emerging Adults, the Satisfaction With Life Scale, and the list of Achieved Criteria for Adulthood. Age and living out of parental home were positively associated with self-reliance in relation to both parents, whereas female gender was related to higher levels of connectedness and seeking parental support. Along with age and involvement in a romantic relationship, connectedness and self-reliance predicted adulthood criteria attainment and life satisfaction. The results support the models of individuation that emphasize growing autonomy and retaining connectedness to parents as pathways towards personal adjustments.

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### Introduction

A delayed transition to adulthood has been observed in (post)industrial societies over the past three decades, with a new developmental period between adolescence and adulthood being referred to as emerging adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2006; Buhl & Lanz, 2007; Douglass, 2007). Alongside with postponement of taking over full adult responsibilities and roles, emerging adulthood is accompanied by an extended process of individuation in relation to parents (Beyers & Goossens, 2003; Buhl, 2008; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Masche, 2008).

Individuation has been portrayed as an intrapsychic process of gaining individuality (a unique sense of self and autonomy) while maintaining connectedness to parents (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). This process unfolds within gradually restructuring parent–child relationships into relationships between equal adults (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2006; Tanner, 2006). The changing parent–child relationships seem to be enhanced by emerging adults' leaving their parents' home, gaining financial independence, and establishing a romantic relationship (Aquilino, 2006; Buhl, 2007). Likewise, these transitional markers were shown to be associated with young people's self-reliant functioning and emotional autonomy,

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personal growth and adjustments (e.g., psychosocial maturity, achieved criteria for adulthood, and subjective well-being) in North American and Western European countries (e.g., Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2007; Kins & Beyers, 2010; White, 2002). However, these associations may be moderated by specific regional factors and cultural traditions as suggested by research in Southern European countries (e.g., Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013; Van de Velde, 2002).

Our study aimed to supplement the current understanding of factors that are associated with emerging adults' individuation in different cultural regions of Europe, and to explore hitherto unreported role of individuation in emerging adults' personal adjustment. Although Slovenia has often been considered an Eastern European country (e.g., Wallace, 2006), it has been influenced by Mediterranean cultures for centuries, which may partly explain why Slovene emerging adults' developmental context shares many features with the Southern European one (Kuhar, 2007; Wright, Kopac, & Slater, 2004).

### *Emerging adulthood in Slovenia*

Like in Southern European countries (e.g., Douglass, 2007; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013; Scabini, 2000), emerging adulthood in Slovenia is characterized by an extremely delayed moving out of parental home (men/women leave at average ages of 31.5/29.8 years, Eurostat Press Office, 2009), prolonged engagement in tertiary education facilitated by available opportunities to retake exams and courses, social policy (free health insurance, low taxes for student work), late marriages and parenthood (the mean ages of women/men at first marriage and mothers at birth of the first child are 29.1/31.4 years and 28.8 years, respectively, Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2012), and a cultural tradition of strong and prolonged reliance on one's family as a source of security and support (Ule & Kuhar, 2003).

The Slovene emerging adults are thus substantially dependent on emotional and financial support of their family (Kuhar, 2007; Lavrič et al., 2010), but most of them get along with parents well, consider parents as important figures in their lives, and do not feel constrained in strivings for personal autonomy or report about a lack of privacy (Lavrič et al., 2010; Puklek Levpušček & Zupančič, 2007). This strongly resembles the satisfactory and highly supportive family setting, which gives young people in Southern European countries a great deal of freedom in prolonged exploration of life possibilities (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Moreno, 2012; Scabini, 2000; Scabini & Cigoli, 1997; Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). Such family solidarity represents a protective factor against the risks of emerging adults' instability and insecurity (Moreno, 2012), but it may also make the process of emerging adults' individuation from parents more difficult (Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013; Zupančič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpušček, 2012).

### *The process of individuation*

A sense of individuality and autonomy (i.e., independence, self-determination, self-governance, reliance on one's own self) gradually develops from early childhood to adulthood. Whereas the primary process of individuation unfolds during the first years of life and results in a child's sense of independent existence (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975), the second individuation in adolescence focuses on restructuring infantile internal representations of parents as omnipotent figures and strengthening one's own internal resources, which leads to a psychologically independent self (Blos, 1967).

While individuation in adolescence is marked by self-delineation within a family context which is still characterized by one's objective dependence on parents, the process in emerging adulthood continues within more symmetrical parent–child relationships and the parents grant their emerging adults more personal freedom in deciding how to lead their lives (Arnett, 2006; Tanner, 2006). Separation issues that were prominent in adolescence (e.g., de-idealization of parents, testing one's self-sufficiency by emphasizing non-dependence on parents) decrease in importance (Koepeke & Denissen, 2012; Komidar, Zupančič, Sočan, & Puklek Levpušček, 2013) as the emerging adults advance in identity development (Arnett, 2000; Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005), improve their competencies across many domains of psychosocial functioning, and actually lead a more independent life (Arnett, 2000; Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009). The balance between autonomous self and maintenance of closeness to parents as the final outcome of the process seems to be a key element of successful individuation, the idea supported by the autonomy–relatedness perspective (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986) and individuation theory (Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

As the independent aspects of self are becoming a core of an individuated self in emerging adulthood, the aspects of relatedness (connectedness and seeking parental support) develop differently. Connectedness, which reflects interpersonal closeness such as mutual respect, trust, interest, enjoyment in parents' company, and open communication with parents, represents a relatively stable relational phenomenon (in terms of mean-level consistency). In contrast, support seeking that refers to one's needs for instrumental assistance from parents (support, approval, help, and advice) in managing personal affairs, shows negative associations with self-reliance, functional and emotional independence from parents, and represents a less developmentally stable relational construct than connectedness (Komidar et al., 2013).

### *Demographic factors and individuation*

Following the autonomy–relatedness perspective, self-reliance should increase with emerging adults' age, while connectedness to parents should remain stable (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Whereas the growing individuality, self-determination, and/or self-reliance were clearly shown to increase with age, the findings about continuity of relatedness appear less straightforward. Some studies reported a small decrease from adolescence to adulthood, especially in seeking

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