

## Revisiting Adolescent Separation-Individuation in the Contexts of Enmeshment and Allocentrism

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Traditional means through which successful separation-individuation occurs, although popular, have undergone criticism. In the current study, involving 188 undergraduate students from a university in the Pacific Northwest, the focus was on the attainment of separation-individuation through more contemporary means. Quantitative findings supported such contemporary means of the attainment of separation-individuation in that participants who identified as allocentric or enmeshed were able to successfully accomplish this crucial developmental task. Clinical implications call for the consideration of the supportive influence that both allocentrism and enmeshment can have on the separation-individuation of the individual.

*Keywords:* allocentrism, collectivism, family cohesion, enmeshment, idiocentrism, individualism, second individuation, separation-individuation

The concepts of family cohesion, separation-individuation, and cultural value sets have historically received a great deal of attention, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. In the last ten years or so, however, less attention has been paid to all three of these constructs than previously accorded across the social science disciplines. Within the field of marriage/couple and family therapy (M/CFT) the concept of family cohesion has received the greatest attention of the three. Indeed, since the advent of measurement and assessment of family cohesion processes (Moos & Moos, 1976; Olson, Sprenkle & Russell, 1979), M/CFTs, theorists, and researchers have presented what are believed to be indicators of health for the individual and by extension the family system. For instance, existing within an enmeshed family system has traditionally been viewed as an indicator of a lack of health (Bograd, 1988; Gardano, 1998; Minuchin, 1974; Olson et al., 1979). Enmeshed family systems, which are characterized by extreme emotional connectedness and loyalty (Olson, 1999), have historically been believed to prevent individuals within such a system from being able to achieve successful separation-individuation (Rice, Cole, & Lapsley, 1990).

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From Blos's (1967) perspective, ego development is a necessary precursor to the establishment of successful-separation individuation in adolescence/young adulthood. As a child, one can rely on and consult the fully developed ego of his or her parents to provide guidance and support; however, as an adult, one must develop and maintain the ability to consult his or her own ego. According to Blos, without a properly developed ego, this process may not be feasible. Thus, successful separation-individuation involves the establishment of a sense of self, separate from the family system, where the adolescent/young adult becomes an autonomous and contributing member of society (Blos, 1967). From an individualistic perspective, individuals who exhibit lower levels of separation-individuation are generally considered less psychologically healthy and functional than their age mates exhibiting higher levels of separation-individuation.

The M/CFT field, which has traditionally been composed of White or European Americans (Doherty & Simmons, 1996), has demonstrated a history of operating from this more individualistic perspective. This has been the case when exploring the concepts of family cohesion and separation-individuation, as well as when attending to culture via the construct of cultural value sets, or those values that are exhibited by groups of individuals with similar traits and/or experiences (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Triandis, 1989). When looking at how cultural value sets are exhibited on the individual level, the term self-construal is applied. That is,

one's self construal is the manner in which individuals conceptualize themselves and their relationships with others (Triandis, 1989). Thus, the relationship between cultural value set and self-construal within the M/CFT field has historically been congruent—meaning that the field has been Westernized in terms of cultural value set and has also been composed of individual members with more idiocentric self-construals, or individuals who tend to embrace the values of individualism, independence, emotional separateness and uniqueness (Singelis, 1994).

Isomorphically, this individualistic value set and idiocentric self-construal have influenced the perception of what is considered healthy. For example, since the values of emotional separateness and autonomy have tended to be embraced and highly valued from an idiocentric perspective (Triandis, 1989) these values have also historically been viewed as indicators of functionality and health by M/CFTs. Accordingly, participants who operate from more of an idiocentric self-construal (Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clark, 1985) have tended to be viewed as more mentally healthy. Moreover, emphasis on the more individualistic values by members of the M/CFT field has also led to the belief that non-enmeshed family systems and individual separation-individuation are what is healthy. These notions of health, which seem to be primarily rooted in the M/CFT field's Western-based values and related cultural bias (Oyserman & Spike, 2008), rather than solid research evidence, are beginning to be challenged (Barrera & Blumer, 2009; Bograd, 1988; Rastogi, Thomas, & Addison, 2009).

Although some M/CFT theorists, clinicians and researchers continue to support this more traditional understanding of what constitutes health in both the individual and family systems, others have challenged such assumptions, pointing out that these characterizations ignore sociocultural aspects like gender and culture (Bograd, 1988). One way that culture is ignored is through the lack of attention to more collectivist cultures and the acknowledgment of how health is defined within these societies. For instance, families who operate from a more collectivist perspective have a tendency to embrace values of interdependency and emotional connectedness (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Triandis, 1989). The self-construal of allocentrism has been applied to those individuals operating from this more collectivist per-

spective (Triandis et al., 1985). An individual with an allocentric self-construal tends to embrace the values of collectivism, interdependence, emotional connectedness, and group cohesiveness (Singelis, 1994).

Historically, from a Western perspective, these values have typically been associated with families who have a tendency to be more enmeshed, and composed of individuals who have been viewed as not being able to attain successful separation-individuation (Brewer & Chen, 2007). Since enmeshed family systems and individuals not demonstrating what is considered to be successful separation-individuation have historically been viewed as unhealthy, the recognition of them has otherwise received little attention by M/CFTs (Barrera & Blumer, 2009).

This trend by M/CFTs, however, does seem to be changing—as researchers, theorists and clinicians are revisiting their historical understanding of what constitutes health for the individual and family. For instance, at the 2009 American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) Annual Conference, research exploring the relationship between enmeshed and disengaged family processes in the context of collectivist and individualist value sets was presented (Barrera & Blumer, 2009). Similarly, Rastogi et al., (2009) gave a presentation which emphasized the importance of deepening clinical consideration when working with couples in therapy through a multicultural framework which primarily focused upon the value sets of collectivism and individualism. In light of this recent attention, the researchers in the current study sought to add to the growing body of literature within the M/CFT field by focusing on the relationship between separation-individuation in the contexts of enmeshment and allocentrism.

### Literature Review

Although there has been research aimed at exploring the relationship between family cohesion processes and separation-individuation (Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989; Lopez, Campbell, & Watkins, 1988; McClanahan & Holmbeck, 1992; Rice et al., 1990) there remains considerable disagreement about the nature of the relationship between these two constructs (Green & Werner, 1996; Manzi, Vignoles, Regalia, & Scabini, 2006). Additionally, sparse literature exists on the relationship between one's self-construal and degree of separation-

individuation (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Witkin & Berry, 1975). Finally, to date, there has been little research exploring the relationship between separation-individuation with the variables of both family cohesion processes and self-construal (Barrera & Blumer, 2009). To attend to the gaps in previous literature, the researchers in the current study explored the degree of individual separation-individuation experienced by the adolescent/young adult within the context of the family cohesion process of enmeshment and the cultural self-construal of allocentrism.

### **Traditional Understanding**

**Separation-Individuation.** Transitions are naturally occurring in every stage of the life span. Some of these transitions take place in childhood and adolescence/young adulthood, specifically the stages of infant/toddler separation-individuation and the second individuation process of adolescence/young adulthood, respectively. The concept of the second individuation is an extension of Mahler, Pine and Bergman's (1973) theory of infant toddler separation-individuation, a psychoanalytic perspective of psychological development in early life. During the separation-individuation phase, the infant/toddler begins to recognize him or herself as having a separate sense of self—different from his/her mothers (and/or fathers) and from the family system as a whole. In relation to this, he/she begins to move through a series of stages in pursuit of independence. These stages eventuate in a period of rapprochement in which the child reconnects to his/her mother (and/or father) and family system with a newfound sense of autonomy (Mahler et al., 1973).

Mahler et al.'s (1973) separation-individuation theory of infancy/toddlerhood has been likened to Blos's (1967) description of the rebellious acting out behavior exhibited by adolescents, suggesting that a second individuation occurs during adolescence. During this second individuation, the adolescent begins to establish a sense of self, separate from the family system, which similarly eventuates in a period of rapprochement. The concept of second individuation is similar to that of differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978), however, in the second individuation process, rather than individuating from one's family of origin by multiple members at multiple points in time, the point of individuation is within one person at one developmental point.

When an individual successfully negotiates the stage of second individuation, the result is separation-individuation (Blos, 1967). When an individual either fails to attain or attains only a small degree of separation-individuation, this has historically been characterized as a sign of maladjustment and dysfunction (Blos, 1967). Indeed, researchers have revealed that some of the many dangers for adolescents/young adults on their path toward adulthood revolve around difficulty in the process of successfully separating and individuating. Some problems adolescents/young adults are thought to be at greater risk for experiencing include: difficulty personally, academically and emotionally in the adjustment to college (Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Rice et al., 1990; Teyber, 1983), increases in separation defensiveness and depression while in college (Levitz-Jones & Orlofsky, 1985), serious psychological disturbance while in this developmental stage (Hoffman, 1984; Teyber, 1983), and difficulty attaining overall success in terms of their personal adjustment in work and love relationships (Hoffman, 1984).

In one of these studies researchers Rice et al., (1990) included some of the constructs found in the current study—namely separation-individuation and family cohesion processes—making their findings relevant for comparison. In the Rice et al., (1990) study, the relationship between family cohesion and second individuation as factors thought to predict adjustment in college was addressed. Two hundred and forty college students were administered the Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI; Hoffman, 1984), the Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) (Hansburg, 1972, 1980), and the Separation Inventory Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine, Green & Millon, 1986) to measure varying levels of the construct of separation-individuation. In this study, family cohesion was measured using the cohesion subscale of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES-III; Olson, Portner & Lavee, 1985) and the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos, 1974). The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 1986) was administered to measure adjustment to college. The researchers found that positive feelings about the separation process were better predictors of adjustment than were independence from parents or family cohesion. Such findings run contrary to the more traditional understanding of separation-individuation and non-enmeshed family cohesion pro-

cesses, which previously were thought to be the only mechanisms that lead to attainment (Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Rice et al., 1990; Teyber, 1983).

**Allocentrism.** As noted in previous research, the relationship between family cohesion and separation-individuation has been given some amount of attention (Lapsley et al., 1989; Lopez et al., 1988; McClanahan & Holmbeck, 1992; Rice et al., 1990). This differs from the small amount of attention the relationship between separation-individuation and the cultural construct of allocentrism has been accorded (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Witkin & Berry, 1975). Although the concept of culture can be defined in many ways, to attend to gaps in the literature, in the current study culture was operationalized via the constructs of cultural value sets and related self-construals. This conceptualization of culture offers a very comprehensive definition in that both the group and individual levels of culture are considered.

Through the cultural value sets of individualism and collectivism the group level of culture is focused upon, and via the self-construals of idiocentrism and allocentrism, the individual level of culture is as well. Large groups of people, like a society or country, are thought of as more individualist or collectivist. Individualism or collectivism influences both group and individual behavior—in that through group-based cultural influences, individuals are socialized into being more individualist or collectivist (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Oetzel, 1998). It is equally true; however, that through individual factors group culture is influenced (Gudykunst, et al., 1996; Oetzel, 1998). Thus, our operational conceptualization views culture as being a product of the larger whole as values and behaviors that are passed down via groups to individuals, as well as being values and behaviors that exist within the individual that influence the larger whole.

Collectivism and individualism, as well as allocentrism and idiocentrism have historically been viewed as dichotomous cultural constructs incompatible with one another (Kagitcibasi, 2003; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). For decades Western researchers have assumed one model of self with regard to cultural context and values. This has been recognition of only individualistic cultures and cultural values—a cultural construction that

was thought to be universal (Cross, et al., 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yamada & Singelis, 1999) and has been the default setting and primary influence of what has been deemed healthy in terms of expression of values and relationships within families and between individuals. Thus, it seems that many constructs, theories and therapies within the mental, relational, and behavioral health fields are tied to the idea that expressions of autonomy, differentiation and separation-individuation are of value and are preferred over those of interdependence, connectedness, and group cohesion. Those individuals and families who do not align with the preferred conceptualization, as with those demonstrating more collectivist type values, embracing more of an allocentric self-construal, and being embedded within a more enmeshed family system, historically have been ignored, misunderstood, and/or viewed as unhealthy in that they do not allow for successful separation-individuation by individual members.

**Enmeshment.** Salvador Minuchin (1974) was among the first to recognize and discuss the concept of family structures with respect to varying systems and subsystems. Minuchin theorized that the development and implementation of boundaries and transactional patterns within family systems is essential for properly maintaining healthy relationships and functioning. Families can range from having overly rigid boundaries to overly diffuse ones, with the majority falling somewhere in the middle along this range.

Olson et al. (1979) expanded upon this framework, outlining the concept of family cohesion through recognition of varying levels of fusion and relatedness within family systems using the Circumplex Model of Family Communication (CMFC). Within this framework, family cohesion is divided into four categories: disengaged, separated, connected and enmeshed, all of which exist along a continuum. Disengaged family systems are characterized by emotional separateness and lack of support whereas enmeshed family systems are characterized by extreme emotional connectedness and loyalty (Olson, 1999). Connected family systems are characterized as having moderate levels of emotional connectedness whereas separated family systems have moderate levels of emotional separateness. Although the connected and separated family systems have some levels of emotional separateness or connect-



edness, these levels are not nearly as extreme as are the disengaged and enmeshed family systems.

Traditionally, from a individualistic perspective and related model of family cohesion, enmeshed and disengaged family systems have been viewed as unhealthy, whereas, separated and connected family systems have been considered optimal or healthy (Manzi et al., 2006; Olson, 1999). Further, what has traditionally has been viewed as being unhealthy for the individual is being embedded in an enmeshed family system (Bograd, 1988; Gardano, 1998; Minuchin, 1974; Olson et al., 1979). The belief has been that a person existing within an enmeshed family system is less able to fully achieve differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978) or separation-individuation (Rice et al., 1990), which in turn leads to problems for that individual and his or her family members. Some of the problems with enmeshment at the individual level include: non-successful individuation, inhibition to individual psychological autonomy, an increase in youth problems and problem internalization, as well as difficulty achieving and maintaining psychosocial maturity (Barber & Buehler, 1996; Barber, Olson, & Shagle, 1994; Greenberger & Sorensen, 1974).

Research by Barber and Buehler (1996) demonstrated that the connection between experiences in an enmeshed family system and negative effects on the individual. In their study of 471 pre, early and middle adolescent students, participants were administered the Colorado Self-Report of Family Functioning Inventory (CSRFFI; Bloom, 1985) to measure the degree of family cohesion, and the Child Behavioral Checklist, Youth Self-Report (CBCL, YSR; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987) to measure adolescent problems. The researchers found positive relationships between enmeshment and youth problems like aggression ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ), depression ( $\beta = .26, p < .01$ ), and withdrawal ( $\beta = .26, p < .01$ ).

### Contemporary Understanding

The need for successful separation-individuation in adolescence and young adulthood is helpful in the healthy development of one's psychological, mental and relational health (Hoffman, 1984; Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Levitz-Jones & Orlofsky, 1985; Rice et al., 1990; Teyber, 1983). The context in which such individuation is attained, however, is debatable. Contrary to a more historically based position that has favored the idea that enmeshed and allocentric individuals are

likely to experience difficulty in terms of being able to successfully individuate, it is possible these familial and cultural systems can and do lead to successful separation in individuals existing within them, even if such separation-individuation is not necessarily valued by such familial or cultural systems.

Although many M/CFTs have focused on supporting the traditional conceptualization of enmeshed family systems as unhealthy, dysfunctional and predominantly unable to produce individuals who can successfully individuate, some have challenged this conceptualization. Scholars and clinicians falling into this latter category make clear that while this depiction is accurate for some enmeshed family systems, it grossly misrepresents the broad spectrum of traits that can characterize such systems and their members. For instance, some feminist family therapists have argued that the idea that it is only through non-enmeshed family systems or those with "clear ego boundaries" [that the] "individual achieves relative separation of emotion and intense feelings" (Bograd, 1988, p. 65) is dismissive of the value of other equally valid and healthy relational experiences. Indeed, some feminist family therapists believe that through interdependent relational systems, individuals, particularly females, can and do experience boundaries that are clear enough to allow for both relational cohesion and individuation (Bograd, 1988).

Results from a study by Farrell and Barnes (1993) lend further support to this later viewpoint with regard to enmeshment and separation-individuation. The focus of their research was to examine the nature of the relationship between cohesion and adaptability for family systems, specifically for parents and adolescents/young adults. In their study, a sample of 699 families from a metropolitan area was obtained through random-digital-dial procedures on a computer-assisted telephone network, and then these families were interviewed. Farrell and Barnes (1993) used the FACES-III (Olson et al., 1985) to measure the independent variable of family cohesion and several questionnaires were used during the interviewing process to measure the dependent variable of family functioning. These questionnaires included, but were not limited to the following: Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (1972), measures of identity diffusion (Farrell & Rosenberg, 1981) and intergenerational individuation (Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1985), the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS;

Spanier, 1976), and a measure of parent-adolescent openness and problems in communication (Barnes & Olson, 1982). Farrell and Barnes (1993) found that the more cohesive (i.e. enmeshed) a family, the better the individual family members functioned. This was observed as better communication between parents and children, greater marital consensus, and better behavioral outcomes for adolescents/young adults. In short, the researchers found that the more cohesion in a family the better all family members functioned across a wide range of outcome indicators of psychological functioning, relationship quality and behavior.

Expanding the historical perspective around enmeshment and attainment of separation-individuation in adolescence/young adulthood is not the only conceptualization with regard to the outcome variable that needs to be updated (Barrera & Blumer, 2009). Indeed, this conceptualization can be expanded to a cultural level, where current notions about individuals embracing an allocentric self-construal and operating in more collectivistic contexts are no longer viewed through the culturally biased lens that such contexts are unable to produce individuals who can successfully individuate (Barrera & Blumer, 2009; Rastogi et al., 2009).

Results obtained in a study by Manzi et al. (2006) lend support to this re-conceptualization of allocentrism/collectivism and differentiation. Their study, examined the nature of the relationship between family cohesion, differentiation, individual identity and well-being in adolescents coming from within two European contexts (United Kingdom and Italy). The United Kingdom primarily assumes an individualistic value set and individuals with self-construals that are more idiocentric in nature, while Italy tends to be more reflective of collectivist values, with individuals embracing more of an allocentric self-construal. Consistent with literature that has examined cohesion and psychological processes in Anglo American adolescents (Barber & Buehler, 1996), the researchers' found adolescent psychological well-being and enmeshment were negatively correlated. Interestingly, though, Manzi et al. (2006) found that family enmeshment and psychological well-being were not negatively correlated in their study of adolescents in Italy.

The findings in the Manzi et al. (2006) study lend support to the notion that family enmeshment is not necessarily maladaptive in terms of individual psy-

chological well-being and individuation in a cultural context that emphasizes family connectedness. Additionally, the authors concluded that it could be that within more collectivistic cultural contexts, behaviors that may be experienced elsewhere as transgressions to interpersonal boundaries, or as limiting to one's personal autonomy, are not experienced as problematic and therefore do not impair the ability to become individuated in such allocentric individuals.

In consideration of the literature and previous research, the purpose of the current study was two-fold. First, the researchers sought to explore the relationship between the adolescent/young adult's level of separation-individuation and the degree of his/her family enmeshment with the hypothesis that those individuals within enmeshed family systems would demonstrate successful separation-individuation. Second, they aimed to explore the relationship between the adolescent/young adult's level of separation-individuation and his/her allocentrism with the hypothesis that those individuals exhibiting allocentrism would demonstrate successful separation-individuation.

## Method

### Participants

Convenience sampling was used to obtain participants in the current study, which meant that those obtained were not fully representative of adolescents/young adults outside of the place of study. Although the use of such a sample presents limitations in terms of generalizability, the practice is quite common in other studies exploring this point in the lifespan, as well as when examining variables like those in the current study (Cross et al., 2000; Manzi et al., 2006; Rice et al., 1990).

Participants included undergraduate students ( $N = 188$ ) housed within a university setting in a mid-sized city in the Pacific Northwest. They ranged in age from 18-24 years ( $M = 20.67$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ), were all unmarried and none had children. Of the 188 participants, 150 were female and 37 were male, with one participant not identifying his/her sex. Additionally, 5.9% ( $N = 11$ ) identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, 1.6% ( $N = 3$ ) identified as Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 8.5% ( $N = 16$ ) identified as Asian, 67.7% ( $N = 127$ ) identified as Caucasian, 1.1% ( $N = 2$ ) identified as African American, 1.6% ( $N = 3$ ) identified as Alaskan Native, 0.5% ( $N = 1$ ) identi-

Table 1  
*Sample Demographics (N = 188)*

	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	37	19.7
Female	150	79.8
<b>Age (in years)</b>		
18	23	12.2
19	32	17.0
20	37	19.7
21	34	18.1
22	29	15.4
23	20	10.6
24	13	6.9
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
African American	2	1.1
Asian	16	8.5
Caucasian	127	67.6
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3	1.6
Hispanic/Latino(a)	11	5.9
Native American	1	0.5
Native Alaskan	3	1.6
Multiracial	24	12.8
<b>Living Arrangement</b>		
Alone	26	13.8
At home with parent(s)	89	47.3
With sibling(s) (not in family home)	6	3.2
With roommate(s)	66	35.1
<b>Family Structure</b>		
Married mother and father (biological)	121	64.4
Married mother and father (adoptive)	9	4.8
Divorced mother and father (biological)	39	20.7
Divorced mother and father (adoptive)	4	2.1
Single mother	12	6.4
Single father	3	1.6
<b>Ordinal Position</b>		
Only child	17	9.0
First born	80	42.6
Second born	49	26.1
Third born	23	12.2
Fourth born	13	6.9
Fifth born	3	1.6
Sixth born or younger	3	1.6

fied as Native American, and 12.8% ( $N = 24$ ) identified as multiracial (see Table 1 for sample demographics).

### Procedure

This project was approved by a university-based Institutional Review Board, and was conducted in February through April of 2009. Participants were recruited online through a university webpage, in person at undergraduate psychology courses, and through an online news publication distributed campus wide via electronic mail. Participants were offered extra credit in their undergraduate psychology courses as well as a chance to win a free iPod Shuffle in exchange for their voluntary participation. The study took place online at [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). Prior to beginning the survey, participants read the terms of an informed consent document and indicated acceptance electronically. They then completed the study and read a debriefing page, which restated the purpose of the study, listed the hypotheses, thanked the participants, and directed them to a link if they were interested in receiving extra credit or entering a raffle for the iPod Shuffle.

### Measures

Participants were asked to respond to questions contained within a demographics questionnaire which included; their present living situation (e.g., alone, with roommates, with family of origin), position within their family of origin (e.g., only child, third born), their family structure (e.g., married mother and father, divorced/adoptive parents), ethnicity, age and sex of the participants.

In order to measure the relationships between family enmeshment, the second individuation process and identification with allocentric value sets, participants completed a battery of questionnaires. Family enmeshment was measured using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale–IV (FACES-IV; Olson et al., 2006), the second individuation process was measured using the Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI; Hoffman, 1984) and identification with allocentrism was measured using the Self-Construal Scale (SCS; Singelis, 1994).

Family Adaptation and Cohesion Evaluation Scale – IV (FACES-IV). Family enmeshment was measured using the Unbalanced Enmeshed subscale of the FACES-IV. The term unbalanced reflects the concept from

the CMFC framework that suggests that balanced levels of family cohesion are healthier than unbalanced models (Olson, 1999). The Unbalanced Enmeshed subscale measures cohesion on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Examples of the statements participants were asked to respond to include: “We spend too much time together,” and “Family members are too dependent on each other”. In the present study, reliability analyses yielded a Cronbach’s alpha for the unbalanced enmeshed subscale of .714. Previous research using this measure has reported an internal consistency score of .84 for the measures of cohesion and a test-retest reliability of .83 (Olson, 1999).

Self-Construal Scale (SCS). The SCS is a 24-item measure that contains two factor analytically derived scales that measure the strength of an individual’s allocentric (interdependent) and idiocentric (independent) self-construal (Singelis, 1994). Self-construal is measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the current study, reliability analyses yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .627 for the allocentric scale and .701 for the idiocentric scale. Examples of statements participants were asked to respond to included: “I have respect for authority figures with whom I interact” (reflective of allocentric value sets), and “I prefer to be direct and forthright when I am dealing with people I’ve just met” (reflective of idiocentric value sets). In previous studies a range of Cronbach’s alphas from .62 to .78 have been attained (Singelis, 1994).

Psychological Separation-Individuation Inventory (PSI). The PSI is a 69-item, factor analytically derived self-report measure designed to assess adolescent/young adult separation-individuation from parents. The scale is divided into four subscales and administered in two formats that attend to the individual’s relationship with his/her mother and father (Hoffman, 1984). The measure is divided into two separate questionnaires to assess separation-individuation from each parent rather than the parental unit as a whole, and the mother and father scales cannot be combined to create a total separation-individuation score. Within the mother and father scales four additional subscales exist: functional independence, emotional independence, conflictual independence and attitudinal independence.

Functional independence refers to the ability of an



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individual to make decisions regarding his or her life (e.g., educational, professional, financial, personal) without feeling the need to consult one or both parents. The concept of attitudinal independence addresses the ability of the individual to form opinions and attitudes that may be different or perhaps challenge the views of his or her parents. Emotional independence focuses specifically on the ability of the individual to experience a sense of freedom from the constant need to seek approval and closeness from one or both parents. The final subscale of the measure, conflictual independence, refers again to the concept of freedom, specifically from experiences with one's parents that may lead to excessive feelings of guilt, anxiety, and responsibility (Hoffman, 1984).

Participants were asked to respond to statements on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 5 (very true of me). Examples of statements participants were asked to respond to in the PSI included, "When I am in difficulty I usually call upon my mother to help me out of trouble," (indicative of functional independence), "I feel that I have obligations to my mother that I wish I didn't have," (indicative of conflictual independence), "My beliefs about

what happens to people when they die are similar to my father's," (indicative of attitudinal independence), and "I'm not sure I could make it in life without my father." (indicative of emotional independence). Hoffman (1984) discussed reliability for the Mother and Father scales of the PSI, reporting Cronbach's alphas ranging from .84 to .92. This study yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .935 for the mother subscale and .951 for the father subscale.

### Results

The hypotheses under investigation were: (1) those embedded within enmeshed family systems can successfully separate during the adolescent/young adult stage, and (2) those exhibiting allocentrism can successfully practice separation-individuation. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to test these relationships.

In support of the second hypothesis, individuals embracing allocentrism were able to separate successfully. In fact, higher levels of separation-individuation were associated with more identification with allocentrism (mother subscale:  $r = 0.446$ ,  $p < .01$ ; father subscale:

Table 2  
*Bivariate Correlations Between Variables*

	Separation Individuation (Mom)	Separation Individuation (Dad)	Enmeshed Family Cohesion	Individualist Value Set	Allocentrism/Collectivist Value Set
Disengaged Family Cohesion	-0.195**	-0.141	0.011	-0.096	-0.139
Separation-Individuation (Mom)		0.601**	0.215**	0.064	0.446**
Separation-Individuation (Dad)			0.212**	0.035	0.349**
Enmeshed Family Cohesion				-0.137	0.088
Individualist Value Set					0.220**

Note. \*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed)

$r = 0.349, p < .01$ ). Additionally, a significant positive correlation was found between enmeshed family cohesion and separation-individuation in adolescence/young adulthood (mother subscale:  $r = 0.215, p < .01$ ; father subscale:  $r = 0.212, p < .01$ ). This suggests that adolescents/young adults from enmeshed families are able to differentiate successfully; thus providing support for the first hypothesis.

### Discussion

As was hypothesized, coming from a more enmeshed family system in late adolescence/young adulthood is related to higher levels of separation-individuation in adolescents/young adults. As was also hypothesized, identification as allocentric was related to higher levels of separation-individuation in adolescents/young adults. One possible explanation for these findings is that individuals within enmeshed family systems, and those who embrace collectivist values, may feel better able to separate and individuate as they have a secure and connected familial base from which to do so. In other words, they feel safe in their secure family base to explore and define who they are as individuals (Byng-Hall, 1999), while remaining connected to the family system. Perhaps the traditional view of separation-individuation as being one that occurs through a process of disconnection from one's familial and cultural systems needs revisiting. Indeed, it would seem that healthy separation-individuation in adolescence/young adulthood can occur through processes of autonomy and disconnection, as well as those of relatedness and connectivity (Kagitcibasi, 2003). Healthy separation-individuation, in fact, might best occur through the latter processes, particularly in the case of persons coming from a particular background (e.g., females, those with multiracial backgrounds, those of Asian descent).

Further, the researchers believe that from both a feminist and culturally sensitive point of view, what traditionally has been viewed as enmeshment and allocentrism, does not necessarily involve diffusion of boundaries and a context of dependency, both of which have been conceptualized as not allowing for the creation of an environment where the individual is capable of achieving successful separation-individuation. Rather, these may best be described as contexts involving transactional patterns comprised of ongoing intra-

familial, interpersonal, and intra-cultural events. As such, these events then enable the family to maintain a sense of privacy through which to ascribe responsibility to individual family members for the transactional patterns (Bograd, 1988; Goldner, 1985; James & McIntyre, 1983; Lerner, 1983; Margolin, Fernandes, Talovic, & Onorato 1983). Thus, in this contemporary framework, it is through the proscription of responsibility to others that one attains a responsibility to oneself.

In general, the results lend support to the idea that how M/CFTs and those in related disciplines have historically viewed the process of attaining successful separation-individuation or differentiation in a way that may be inaccurate and rooted in a predominately individualistic understanding of such a process. In regard to this concern, the researchers in the current study advocate that when looking at individuals who are members of more enmeshed family systems or who may demonstrate more of an allocentric self-construal, clinicians and researchers need to be sure that they are not making assumptions with regard to the individual's level of autonomy and connectivity. Instead, it is important for clinicians and researchers to recognize that men and women of any background, including those of a more enmeshed or collectivistic one, do not reach individuation through a universal path. If such professionals fail to see such variation in the individuation process of a person, due to their limited knowledge of only a traditional understanding of a path to individuation, it may prevent such well-intentioned providers from seeing the individual for who he or she truly is and how this person may have reached this point in their identity development.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the contributions of this study, the results need to be interpreted within the limitations of the study itself. One limitation exists in terms of participant sampling. Random sampling was not utilized within the study design, but rather a convenience sample of undergraduate students was utilized. The use of a convenience sample of undergraduate students can be considered limited in terms of the diversity within the sample itself. For example, diversity within educational levels of participants was limited as all of the participants were enrolled in a university. Additionally, the sample was not fully representative of adolescents/young

adults making the transition to young adulthood in all of the United States, but rather was specific to those college based adolescents/young adults in the area of study. In relation to the nature of the sample utilized in the current study, the researchers recognized the limitations. Such samples, however, are oftentimes utilized when exploring the period of adolescence/young adulthood, as well as when examining variables like those in the current study (Cross et al., 2000; Manzi et al., 2006; Rice et al., 1990).

Another limitation in the current study was that the participants were primarily Caucasian and female. Thus, caution must be taken in that the results were acquired in the context of a primarily homogeneous group of people. In relation to these limitations, future researchers would benefit from obtaining a sample that is more balanced in terms of geographic location, race, sex, age, educational levels and socioeconomic status. Interestingly, in the current study, there was an emerging trend demonstrating that possible differences between males and females, as well as between different racial groups, existed with regard to levels of separation-individuation, however, the participant sample was not nearly diverse enough to gather definitive information regarding these trends or to make generalizations about what they could mean. Therefore, future research specifically focused upon exploring differences in levels of separation-individuation, in the contexts of enmeshed family systems and allocentrism, between males and females, as well as in individuals belonging to different racial groups, is recommended.

### Conclusion

Results from the current study lend support to the notion that traditional conceptualizations of the process and context through which people are believed to attain success in their development of separation-individuation may have some continued utility as long as it is employed with the understanding and sensitivity that not all individuals follow the same pathway to achieve successful individuation. Results from this study demonstrated that separation-individuation can and is attained when individuals live in enmeshed family systems or embrace an allocentric self-construal suggesting that a person's sense of self may develop within a context of relatedness, rather than one of separateness. Additionally, this research lends further support to the notion

that the individual needs to be understood not only from his/her own point of view in isolation from others, but also in consideration of his/her larger culture (a culture that is inclusive of more than individualism) and within the context of his/her family, and not merely within the confines of disconnected and separated family systems.

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