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Impulsivity and the Dissolution of Romantic Relationships

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### Abstract

The primary aim of this study was to examine whether impulsivity is related to emerging adults' motivations for breaking up with romantic partners. Previous findings indicate that emerging adults (ages 18-25) tend to base their decision-making on the fulfillment of their needs for *independence* and/or *interdependence*. The present study included 113 emerging adults who reported the reasons why they decided to end a romantic relationship in the past six months. These responses were coded for the presence of independence and interdependence motivations. The UPPS-P impulsive behavior scale measured five facets of impulsivity: *negative urgency*, *lack of premeditation*, *lack of perseverance*, *sensation seeking*, and *positive urgency*. T-tests were conducted to determine whether the various facets of impulsivity varied according to the motivations for breaking up. Results showed that emerging adults who referenced interdependence needs tended to score higher on *negative urgency* and *positive urgency* compared to those who did not reference interdependence needs. However, there were no differences in impulsivity between those who did and did not reference independence needs. Implications of these findings will be discussed.

### Impulsivity and the Dissolution of Romantic Relationships

During the developmental stage termed “emerging adulthood,” young people between the ages of 18-25 endure a time of great exploration and change (Arnett, 2015). It is during this time period that many emerging adults have their first opportunity to make their own decisions and reap the consequences of those choices (Arnett, 2015; Baiocco, Laghi, D’Alessio, 2008; Rolison & Scherman, 2003). Many emerging adults who have the ability to attend college are provided the opportunity to meet new people with differing worldviews and others who come from diverse backgrounds, which can challenge and strengthen their own beliefs (Arnett, 2015). This newfound freedom can both positively and negatively impact the life of an emerging adult depending on the type of choices they make. Thus, the goal of the present study is to better understand the ways impulsivity effects a decision that individuals often make in emerging adulthood: deciding to end a romantic relationship.

#### **Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood**

According to Arnett (2015), the founder of emerging adulthood, there are five dimensions that are characteristic of this developmental period: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities/optimism. Several of these features are critical to the establishment and potential dissolution of romantic relationships.

**Identity exploration.** During emerging adulthood, individuals are expected to explore various paths for their life, which helps them establish who they are and what they want to become in their lifetime (Arnett, 2015). This is often seen as the primary goal of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Collins & Steinberg, 2008). Prior to entering this developmental stage, young people live primarily under the shadow of their parents, engaging in pre-approved activities, spending time with peers who are deemed appropriate to socialize with, and attending

school and events that are dictated for them. Now that they have the opportunity to move away from home and start afresh, emerging adults have an unprecedented opportunity to assert their independence and try out different experiences (e.g., jobs, relationships, living arrangements, etc.) to gradually discover their true selves (Arnett, 2015).

**Instability.** Throughout the transition from adolescence into adulthood, emerging adults often make revisions to the previously established plan for their life. During the formative years, adolescents develop a plan, from where they will go to college to the type of career they want to have and the city they want to live in; however this plan rarely makes it through emerging adulthood unscathed (Arnett, 2015). Some undergraduate students change their major several times. Others may enroll in a different university after a semester or two. Some emerging adults enter college expecting to marry their high school sweetheart, but find themselves breaking up before midterms. The sense of looming instability is considered to be a feature of this life stage due to the lack of stable, long-term commitments (Arnett, 2015). Emerging adults have the freedom to make decisions and change them multiple times without the fear of dire consequences.

**Self-focus.** Emerging adulthood provides individuals with the ability to make life decisions solely for themselves. As they begin to establish who they are and what they want out of life, young people have the opportunity to do whatever they would like, without parents, a spouse, or children present to influence their choices (Arnett, 2015). Arnett (2015) establishes that the goal of this self-focus is to “learn to stand alone as a self-sufficient person prior to making a commitment to another person” (p. 14). This feature is not meant to label emerging adults as selfish; rather it describes the inward focus that many emerging adults possess as they attempt to establish their personal identity (Arnett, 2015).

**Possibilities/Optimism.** It is also characteristic of emerging adults to have a sense of optimism for their future and the possibilities life may hold for them (Arnett, 2015). Young people have yet to become jaded by failure due to living with their parents' safety net for 18 years. They still have big dreams and high hopes for the future and fully believe they will reach the goals they have set for their self. Emerging adults take advantage of the opportunities this period of time provides them with to redefine their sense of self, who they are, and what they want to become (Arnett, 2015).

### **Decision Making in Emerging Adulthood**

Miller and Byrnes (2001) define decision making as “the process of choosing a course of action from among two or more alternatives while in the midst of pursuing one’s goals” (p. 237). Emerging adults make a plethora of decisions on a daily basis and the consequences for such choices range from marginal to dire depending on the situation. These decisions may be as trivial as what to eat for breakfast or which shirt to wear to work; however, some decisions have a much greater impact on the long term, including the choice of undergraduate major, where to intern for the summer, or should they remain in a relationship with their significant other. Emerging adult decision-making is highly influenced by several of the dimensions that are characteristic of this time period. Due to the sense of possibilities and optimism embodied by many emerging adults, it is common for people to entertain potential decisions that may provide them with new, exciting life experiences that may seem risky or unrealistic to stable adults (Arnett, 2015). They also tend to make decisions that further their own individual goals or fit into the personal plan they have developed for their life, rather than the one preferred by their parents or others. Emerging adults feel they have the freedom to make such inwardly focused decisions as a way of self-exploration and discovery.

**Theoretical Framework: Developmental Systems Theory**

To better understand emerging adults and their motivations during this time period, we make use of the Developmental Systems Theory developed by Lerner et al. (2005). This theoretical framework seeks to explain the relationship between an individual's development and their interactions within their environment as he or she grows up. In emerging adulthood, individuals act as active agents, seeking out new, exciting experiences as a way of personal exploration and discovery. As such, these experiences aid in their fulfillment of various developmental needs. When applied to this life stage, the Developmental Systems Theory suggests that as an emerging adult encounters a variety of situations, he or she will determine whether or not the experience helps them accomplish a developmental need, and act accordingly to achieve fulfillment in the future. This may mean an individual remains within a social context that promotes their positive development, or removes their self from a setting which they perceive as a poor fit to their personal needs (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Lerner et al. 2005).

The various experiences emerging adults encounter during this time period greatly shape the decisions they make which helps them address various developmental needs, including the establishment of a balance between *independence* and *interdependence* (Arnett, 2015; Collins & Steinberg, 2008).

**Independence.** A crucial aspect of development during emerging adulthood is the establishment of one's independence. Traditionally, emerging adults make the transition from living under their parents' roof to living on their own, be it in a college setting, entering the workforce, or joining the military (Arnett, 2015). This shift in residence is an impactful moment in the emerging adult's life, providing them with an opportunity to rely fully on themselves (and not their parents' safety net) for their first time in their lives, especially in emotional and

financial domains (Arnett, 2015). This also provides emerging adults with the ability to establish their identity apart from their parents and fully develop their own sense of self (Arnett, 2015; Grotevant & Cooper, 1998).

**Interdependence.** It is also commonplace for emerging adults to establish and maintain close, interpersonal relationships with non-familial individuals, both romantic and platonic (Collins et al., 2009; Grotevant & Cooper, 1998). This is crucial for emerging adults as they try to establish a sense of belonging in a community different from the one their family provided them. This assertion of interdependence also provides individuals with an outlet to explore their needs for intimacy and sexual expression with those they are attracted to through the lens of romantic relationships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999).

### **Dissolution of Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood**

A common area for exploration in emerging adulthood is romantic relationships. The average American youth experiences their first romantic relationship during adolescence, prior to entering emerging adulthood (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Oftentimes, these relationships in early adolescence last for only a few months (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009) but increase in length as they enter into later adolescence and early adulthood (Furman & Winkles, 2012; Seiffge-Krenke & Shulman, 2003). Although relationships last longer in emerging adulthood, emerging adults still move in and out of relationships (Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Due to the tumultuous nature of emerging adulthood dating practices, romantic dissolution (i.e., breaking up) is a normative aspect of this life stage (Arnett, 2015). However, romantic dissolution has received substantially less attention than ongoing romantic relationships within the realm of emerging adulthood research. Much of the empirical research conducted on romantic relationships ends as soon as a breakup is initiated (Davila et al., 2009). Due to this lack

of research, there is still much to understand about the process in which individuals choose to end romantic relationships.

It is understood that most emerging adults choose to initiate romantic experiences (i.e., romantic relationships) to fulfill their developmental needs for interdependence. Thus, if a romantic partner and/or romantic relationship fails to help fulfill an individual's developmental needs, an emerging adult will take the necessary action to ensure their individual needs are met. Research has yet to examine the factors that involve antecedents to breaking up.

### **Decision-Making and Impulsivity in Emerging Adulthood**

Impulsivity constructs are often used as indicators and/or determinants of a variety of dysfunctional behaviors and psychological disorders (Magid & Colder, 2007; Smith et al., 2007). While there has been much debate within the psychological community over the years regarding a standardized definition of impulsivity (Evenden, 1999; Gonzalez, Reynolds, & Skewes, 2011; Smith et al., 2007), there has been recent widespread agreement with a 4-type construct model of impulsivity (Magid & Colder, 2007; Smith et al., 2007), much of which has been influenced by the introduction of the Whiteside and Lynam (2001) UPPS Impulsive Behavior scale. Their study suggested four distinct but interrelated impulsivity-like constructs: urgency, (lack of) premeditation, (lack of) perseverance, and sensation seeking.

The brain continues developing into the early and middle years of emerging adulthood (Taber-Thomas & Perez-Edgar, 2015). This is contrary to prior research which presumed the brain was fully developed at the end of adolescence (Taber-Thomas & Perez-Edgar, 2015). When individuals cross the threshold from adolescence into emerging adulthood, their prefrontal cortex is still advancing to reach a fully completed state. This area of the brain is located at the front of the frontal lobe and plays a role in an individual's executive functioning, such as the

planning, decision making, and emotion regulation processes (Siddiqui et al., 2008). Due to the continued development of this portion of the brain, the choices and responses an individual makes during this time period may be unpredictable and impulsive.

### **The Current Study**

The current study assessed the role of impulsivity in the dissolution of romantic relationships. We intended to determine if there was a relationship between an individual's impulsivity and their choice to dissolve a romantic relationship as a way for emerging adults to fulfill their independence and interdependence needs. To do so, we administered the UPPS Impulsive Behavior Scale (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001) and compared those scores to quantitatively analyzed open-ended responses about the motivations behind the decision to break up with a recent romantic partner.

It is understood that the need to establish independence and interdependence in the life of emerging adults greatly influences the choices they make concerning romantic relationships (Arnett, 2015). For example, if an emerging adult is in a relationship with an individual whom they presume is holding them back from fulfilling their needs for independence (i.e., being too clingy, prevent them from exploring different life options, etc.), the individual may choose to dissolve the relationship to seek out other potential partners whom may better suit their needs.

Given that emerging adulthood is theorized as a time of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and possibilities/optimism, it is possible that an emerging adult will decide to end a romantic relationship if the relationship and/or the romantic partner does not allow the individual to fulfill his or her independent needs. Thus, we hypothesize that emerging adults who score higher on a measure of impulsivity will reference independence needs in their reasons for

breaking up with romantic partners more often than those who do not reference independence needs.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study involved 113 emerging adults (47% women), who each reported initiating at least one break up with a romantic partner within a six-month period prior to the study. The criterion of *initiating a breakup* was borrowed from Hopper's (2001) marital research, which defined such an action as "ultimately [declaring] that the [relationship] is over" (p. 432). On average, the individuals were 22.3 years old ( $SD = 1.82$ ,  $range = 18-25$ ). The majority (62.8%) identified as White/Caucasian, followed by Black/African American (14.2%), Hispanic/Latino/a (10.6%), Asian/Asian American (5.3%), American Indian (0.9%), and 6.2% identified as Biracial/Multiracial. A majority (88/5%) of participants identified as heterosexual, followed by bisexual (9.7%), gay/lesbian (0.9%), and 0.9% as "other." Nearly a third (34.5%) of participants attended some college, while another third earned a Bachelor's degree (30.1%), high school diploma/GED equivalent (15.9%), Associate's degree (11.5%), trade/technical/vocational training (5.3%), some high school (0.9%), Master's degree (0.9%), and professional degree (0.9%).

### **Procedure**

Following approval from the university's institutional review board, participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowdsourcing platform hosted by Amazon.com. By way of the internet, MTurk connects researchers with a participant pool that is more diverse and therefore more representative of the demographic makeup of the United States

than the college samples typically used in research studies (Ipeirotis, 2010; Ross, Zaldivar, Irani, & Tomlinson, 2009).

A brief description of the study was provided on the “Human Intelligence Task” page on MTurk. Interested individuals clicked a link that provided more information, and were routed to an informed consent form to gain additional information about the study and determine their eligibility. Participants thus self-selected into this study, which was anonymous. From MTurk, participants were routed to Qualtrics, an online survey system, to complete the study. After completion of the survey, participants were rerouted to MTurk and each received \$2.01 as compensation. Measures in the present study assessed basic demographic information, romantic experiences, and individuals’ understandings of emerging adulthood.

### **Measures**

**Demographics.** Participants completed a demographics questionnaire that surveyed basic demographic data including age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

**Romantic experiences and dissolution.** The Romantic Experiences Questionnaire was developed for use in this study. This questionnaire asked about participants’ relationship history, current relationship status, and relationship length for those in romantic relationships.

The Romantic Experiences Questionnaire included items that inquired about relationship dissolution experiences specifically. Prior to completing this primary area of the survey, participants read a short paragraph about the typicality of relationship dissolution, which was created to normalize breakups for participants and help them feel comfortable with disclosing such information. Participants were asked to describe what led them to break up with their last boyfriend or girlfriend. Instructions were adapted from Moffit and Singer’s (1994) self-defining memory prompt. Participants were also prompted to describe the events leading up to their

decision to end the romantic relationship. A textbox was provided for participants' responses. The questionnaire also asked about the length of their most recently ended romantic relationship.

**Impulsivity scale.** Impulsivity was assessed using the UPPS-P Impulsive Behavior scale (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). The UPPS is a 45-item, self-report questionnaire utilizing a four level Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*agree strongly*) to 4 (*disagree strongly*). The questionnaire measures for four distinctive features of impulsivity: Lack of Premeditation, Urgency, Sensation Seeking, and Lack of Perseverance. The first facet, Lack of Premeditation, evaluates an individual's ability to think through the potential consequences of their actions before acting them out (e.g., "I like to stop and think things over before I do them"). The second facet, Urgency, assesses an individual's propensity to act upon strong emotional impulses, especially positive emotions (excitement, mania, etc.) and/or negative emotions (anger, depression, etc.) (e.g., "Sometimes I do impulsive things that I later regret"). The next facet, Sensation Seeking, assesses an individual's tendency to seek out exhilarating and/or stimulating situations (e.g., "I generally seek new and exciting experiences and sensations"). The last feature, Lack of Perseverance, assesses an individual's ability to complete tiresome and/or unexciting tasks or commitments (e.g., "I am able to pace myself so as to get things done on time").

### **Analytic Strategy**

To address the first research question and analyze participants' open-ended responses, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). Given the length of participants' responses, which were several sentences long, this analytic strategy was chosen to capture the possibility of multiple themes in a given response, as romantic relationships can end for a variety of reasons. We utilized a deductive, top-down approach, using the definitions of each of the sub-components of independence (i.e., identity and autonomy) and interdependence (i.e., affiliation,

intimacy, and sexual reciprocity) to guide our investigation. Definitions for various categories were consistent with previous developmental theory and research on developmental tasks (Arnett, 2015; Zimmer-Gembeck, Arnold, & Connolly, 2014).

Next, sorting material into categories involved the following process: The lead graduate student on the project reviewed each response separately to determine the developmental need(s) that were present in the response. The presence, rather than the frequency, of referenced needs were recorded. Thus, if one particular need (e.g., intimacy) was referenced twice throughout the response, its presence was only recorded one time. Therefore, each response could have more than one referenced developmental need, but up to five developmental needs if all subcategories (autonomy, identity, affiliation, intimacy, and sexual reciprocity) were referenced in the response. Responses that included words, sentences, or phrases that could not be categorized into any of the five subcategories were separated for future analysis.

To establish reliability and safeguard against biased coding (Saldaña, 2013), an advanced undergraduate research assistant double-coded a random subset of 20% of the total number of responses. The lead graduate student on the project trained the research assistant about the process of coding and the five developmental needs, and provided written definitions of each of the developmental needs. Inter-coder agreement was 82.6%; 19 of 23 responses were coded identically. Coding disagreements that arose were resolved via discussions between the lead graduate student on the project and the research assistant to establish the final coding. After reliability was established, the lead graduate student on the project coded the remainder of the responses. Subsequently, the presence or absence of each of the two possible developmental needs were dummy coded (1 = *present*, 0 = *absent*) to determine frequencies. When conducting the quantitative analyses, independent-samples t-tests were used to assess differences in

impulsivity scores according to expressed developmental need(s) referenced for termination of a romantic relationship.

## Results

### Independence

When comparing emerging adults' impulsivity levels and their references to *independence* needs, we were unable to find any significant differences between the impulsivity levels of those who expressed a need for independence and those who did not. In examining the subcategories of impulsivity, none of the variations in impulsivity seemed to play a role in participants' decision to dissolve their relationship under the guise of independence needs: *negative urgency*,  $t(99) = 1.06, p = .29$ , *lack of premeditation*,  $t(99) = 1.20, p = .23$ , *lack of perseverance*,  $t(99) = .74, p = .46$ , *sensation seeking*,  $t(99) = -.07, p = .94$ , and *positive urgency*,  $t(99) = .83, p = .41$ .

### Interdependence

Contrary to our hypothesis, when comparing emerging adults' impulsivity levels and their references to *interdependence* needs, we found significant differences between the impulsivity levels of those who expressed a need for interdependence and those who did not. The participants who expressed a need for interdependence as an explanation for the dissolution of their romantic relationship had a tendency to score higher on the *negative urgency*,  $t(99) = -2.82, p = .01$ , and *positive urgency* subsets of the UPPS,  $t(99) = -1.87, p = .06$ , which was trending significance.

### Independence and Interdependence

Due to the complex nature of the participants' reasons for initiating a breakup, there was overlap between references of independence and interdependence needs. To ensure that such

situations were accounted for, a one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare individuals with responses referencing independence only, interdependence only, and both independence and interdependence. There was a significant effect on negative urgency at the  $p < .05$  level [ $F(2, 97) = 3.64, p = .03$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the means score of negative urgency for the independence only condition ( $M = 2.35, SD = .66$ ) was significantly lower than that of the interdependence only condition ( $M = 2.5063, SD = .59$ ) and the both independence and interdependence condition ( $M = 2.53, SD = .61$ ).

## Discussion

### Impact of Impulsivity on the Dissolution of Romantic Relationships

The present findings support a link between negative urgency and breaking up with a romantic partner for interdependence reasons. This suggests that when a person's needs for intimacy, affiliation, or sexual reciprocity are unmet within a relationship, an individual may be more inclined to break up with their partner out of frustration or anger over their unfulfilled developmental needs. Conversely, the study found very little evidence for a link between any of the facets of impulsivity and breaking up with a romantic partner over unmet independence needs.

### Emotional Reactivity, Impulsivity, and Breaking Up with a Romantic Partner

The tendency for negative urgency to influence an individual's decision to break up with a romantic partner for interdependence means aligns with the concept of *emotional reactivity*. According to the literature, emotional reactivity is the "intensity of response to an emotionally salient stimulus" (Cogle et al., 2013, p. 478). When an individual is classified as negatively urgent, this facet of impulsivity influences them to make decisions which are fueled by their strong negative emotional reaction to the situation. Perhaps when a person realizes that their

interdependence needs are not being filled by their romantic partner, they have an intense emotional reaction to the lack of fulfillment from their partner, ranging from sadness and frustration to anger. This strong emotional response leads them to terminate their relationship with a romantic partner to pursue other endeavors which might lead to satisfying their developmental needs.

Prior research has shown that individuals who are prone to seek interdependence with others and define their sense of self in terms of their relationships tend to respond in an emotionally reactive manner (Ross & Murdock, 2014). These individuals place a high emphasis on their relationships and receiving their needs from outside sources rather than independently fulfilling their needs. Due to externally sourcing the maintenance of their needs, interdependent individuals are constantly evaluating whether or not the people in their life are capable of fulfilling the responsibility created for them. This endless internal struggle can cause these individuals to feel that their partner is not meeting their interdependence needs. Such determinations cause them to emotionally react to the lack of fulfillment. Independent individuals are adept at identifying their needs and satisfying them on their own. Whether that means entering into or exiting a relationship or taking a new opportunity or letting it pass for another, these individuals actively seek their own fulfillment. When interdependent individuals seek this fulfillment through others, they are more likely to sense their interdependence needs are not being met and respond accordingly through emotional reactivity.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Conclusions**

The present study drew upon two phenomena common within emerging adulthood: romantic relationship dissolution and impulsivity. As indicated by Shulman and Connolly (2013), it is common for emerging adults to move in and out of romantic relationships on their

pursuit to fulfill various wants and needs. Prior research also notes that the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until late in emerging adulthood, which influences an individual's ability to make well thought out decisions and regulate their emotions, leading them to act in an impulsive manner. In order to properly examine the multifaceted sphere of romantic relationship dissolution, we ensured each distinct situation was addressed via ANOVA statistical models. The study was also strengthened by the inclusion of a diverse population sample, including current college students, those who attended college in the past, and some who have not attended any college.

Our study included several limitations. First, a majority of our participants in the study identified as European American. There is documented variation in relationship dissolution among different racial backgrounds (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009), therefore, future studies should include a more diverse sample. Second, the majority of our sample identified as heterosexual. It would be beneficial for future studies to include a more diverse representation of sexual orientations to determine if there is variation among impulsivity and an individual's reasoning for breaking up with a romantic partner in emerging adulthood.

Altogether, the present study addressed a potential link between an individual's impulsivity and their decision to dissolve a romantic relationship. In examining the results, we found little evidence linking any of the features of impulsivity with relationship dissolution for independence reasons. There was also little evidence pointing to a relationship between impulsivity and ending a relationship for both independence and interdependence reasons. However, there was a significant relationship between impulsivity and breaking up with a partner for interdependence reasons. On further investigation, the link was most strongly correlated with the negative urgency facet of impulsivity.

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