

Feeling Needed and Useful during the Transition to Young Adulthood

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A more complete understanding of the role of social relationships during the transition to young adulthood should include the extent to which adolescents believe that others see them as needed and useful. Two samples of late adolescents ($Ns = 237, 298$) aged 18 to 25 years completed measures of feeling needed and useful by family and friends. Feeling needed and useful by family and friends did not differ across demographic groups, was associated with greater received support, and predicted psychological well-being above-and-beyond received support. Future research should examine how social relationships provide late adolescents with the opportunity to be needed and useful at a time of life when they are seeking to establish their place in the social world.

Key words: needed and useful – close relationships – transition to young adulthood

Close relationships with family and friends facilitate positive development throughout adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Interestingly, connectedness with others is typically viewed as a source of support from which adolescents can draw as needed. An emerging body of work, however, highlights the additional benefit of providing support and resources back to others for adolescents' own health and well-being (Schacter & Margolin, 2018; Schreier, Schonert-Reichl, & Chen, 2013). In addition to having effects at the time of giving, contributing to other people and groups is thought to convey a more general sense of being valued and needed by others (Fuligni, 2019).

Believing oneself to be needed and useful to others is a core part of social relationships, particularly during adolescence and the transition to adulthood when individuals are establishing their role in the social world (Burrow, Ratner, Porcelli, & Sumner, 2020). Arguments for the fundamental social orientation and psychological needs of humans include the central role played by mutuality and doing things for others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). The transition to adulthood typically involves consideration of responsibilities to family, peers, and communities as one makes decisions about schooling, work, and where to live (Arnett, 2000; Fuligni & Pederesen, 2002). Indeed, a dominant theme in adolescents' narratives about finding a sense of purpose and meaning is the desire to have an impact upon

their social worlds and feeling needed and useful by others (Burrow et al., 2020; Damon, 2008).

Despite its theorized importance and frequent mention by adolescents, however, feeling needed and useful by others rarely has been assessed systematically. There are hints of the importance of directly assessing these sentiments in research on midlife and aging that has used questions such as "How often do you feel useful to your family?" to predict morbidity and mortality (Gruenewald, Karlamangla, Greendale, Singer, & Seeman, 2007). The same types of assessments have not been done frequently among adolescents and young adults. Work on generativity among adolescents has come close, using measures that include items about feeling needed, but those measures typically assess more general concepts such as a sense of legacy (e.g., "I feel as though my contributions will exist after I die"; Lawford & Ramey, 2015) and do not focus on specific relationships.

Assessing adolescents' psychological sense of being needed and useful, therefore, would be a valuable addition to our understanding of the roles played by social relationships during the transition to young adulthood. Feeling needed and useful should be examined separately for family and friends, given the developmental changes and individual differences in the importance of each type of relationship (Aquilino, 1997; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). On the one hand, adolescents may feel more needed by friends because of the greater mutuality in these relationships (Youniss & Smollar, 1987). On the other hand, adolescents do pro-

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vide increasing resources and support to their families across the transition to adulthood (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). Feeling needed and useful likely is tied to more received support from both family and friends, given the role of mutuality in high quality relationships (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Guan & Fuligni, 2015). Given variations in the extent to which families and friends depend upon adolescents (e.g., Hernández & Bámaca-Colbert, 2016), group differences in a sense of feeling needed and useful according to factors such as ethnicity, gender, and economic resources should be estimated. Finally, feeling needed and useful may increase with age as a result of the increased attention to responsibility to others across the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

The potential importance of feeling needed and useful during the transition to adulthood can be examined in terms of its relation to psychological well-being. Believing oneself to be of use to others should related to both lower negative (e.g., depressive symptoms and loneliness) and higher positive (e.g., self-esteem and sense of meaning) aspects of well-being, as suggested by prior research on individual's contributions to others (Li & Ferraro, 2005; Schacter & Margolin, 2018). Given the known importance of received support for well-being (e.g., Guan & Fuligni, 2015), the level of such support should be statistically controlled when estimating whether feeling needed and useful has unique importance for psychological adjustment.

The present study addressed three specific questions about the potential importance of feeling needed and useful by others during the transition to adulthood. First, are there differences in feeling needed and useful by family and friends according to ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, and age? Second, is feeling needed and useful associated with relationship quality and received support from family and friends? Finally, does feeling needed and useful predict psychological well-being above-and-beyond received relational support during this important period of developmental transition?

METHOD

Samples

Participants were recruited from the online research platforms TurkPrime (Sample 1) and Prolific (Sample 2). The selection criteria for Sample 1 were anyone in the United States from 18 to 25 years of age. The criteria for Sample 2 were

constrained to 18–21 years of age in the United States in order to focus more on this age period, and to those who self-identified as African American, Latino, or European American in order to obtain more ethnic diversity. Data collection continued until reaching the targeted sample sizes of approximately 250 for Sample 1 and approximately 300 (100 from each ethnic group) for Sample 2 in order to provide enough statistical power to detect anticipated effect sizes of at least $\beta = .20$ in the associations between feeling needed and useful and psychological well-being (Cohen, 1988). Despite the screening, Sample 2 yielded participants who primarily identified as being from ethnic backgrounds in addition to those listed in the screener. These individuals were retained in the analyses.

TurkPrime participants took approximately 30 min to complete the questionnaire and were compensated in accordance with their own specific arrangements with the platform (e.g., gift cards, reward points, and cash). Prolific participants took approximately 45 min to complete their somewhat longer questionnaire and were paid \$10. Attention-check questions were employed in order to remove participants who responded randomly and questionnaires that may have been completed by automated programs (e.g., "Did you pay attention and answer honestly? (Yes/No)," "Please write two sentences about your favorite hobby."). Participants who responded "No" to the question about paying attention or did not answer any attention-check questions were removed from the samples before analyses (Sample 1 = 44, Sample 2 = 23).

Characteristics of the final samples are described in Table 1. Among Sample 1, almost two-thirds

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics

	<i>Sample 1</i>	<i>Sample 2</i>
<i>N</i>	237	298
<i>M</i> age (<i>Range</i>)	21.93 (18–25)	19.47 (18–21)
% Female	64.60	51.34
% Latino	14.77	26.85
% Asian American	10.55	17.11
% African American	11.39	26.17
% European American	50.21	20.47
% Other Ethnicity	13.08	9.40
% Mother College Grad	37.98	41.95
% College Grad	27.85	4.36
% in College	48.52	68.12

Note. Other ethnicity includes those who reported more than one ethnicity.

(64.60%) identified as female, half as European American (50.21%), and smaller proportions as Latino (14.77%), Asian American (10.55%), African American (11.39%), or another ethnicity (13.08%). Sample 2 generally was more evenly divided by sex (51.34% female) and ethnicity (Latino: 26.85%, Asian American: 17.11%, African American: 26.17%, European American: 20.47%, and Other: 9.40%).

Sample 2 completed the questionnaire in April–May 2020, when school closures and physical distancing rules were put into place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 96% of those in school had experienced a school closure, and 88% of the entire sample reported living with their parents or other family members. As this was early in the pandemic, actual rates of COVID-19 diagnoses for oneself (1.4%) or someone personally known to the respondent (23.5%) were somewhat low.

Measures

Feeling needed and useful. A new self-report measure of feeling needed and useful by others was created. The goal was to produce a brief, direct measure that could be made specific to different settings in individuals' lives and could be completed by diverse participants from early adolescents to young adults in the current and subsequent research. Previous studies that utilized single items tapping usefulness (e.g., "How often do you feel useful to your family?"; Gruenewald et al., 2007) or assessed providing resources and support to others (e.g., helping the family; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009) informed the creation of the new measure.

Participants in Sample 1 used a scale that ranged from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree") to respond to the five questions in reference to the family: "I feel useful in my family," "I feel needed in my family," "I feel that my family can depend upon me," "I feel that I contribute to my family," and "I feel that I am a good member of my family." Descriptive statistics suggested a negative skew toward more positive mean scores ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.06$, Skewness = $-.74$). To correct for the skewness problem that may have been due to many participants overgeneralizing their experiences and selecting the most extreme value (i.e., 5, "Strongly Agree"; Tong, Bickmeier, & Rogelberg, 2020), the response scale for Sample 2 was changed to a frequency scale: 1 = "Almost never," 2 = "Once in a while," 3 = "Sometimes," 4 = "Frequently," and 5 = "Almost always." Sample 2 also completed the items separately in

reference to family and friends. Descriptive statistics for Sample 2 suggested that the negative skew was reduced (Family: $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.03$, Skewness = $-.28$; Friends: $M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.99$, Skewness = $-.38$).

Separate confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) for each measure that modeled all items loading onto a single latent factor indicated good model fit (Sample 1, Family: CFI = .95, TLI = .92, SRMR = .04; Sample 2, Family: CFI = .96, TLI = .93, SRMR = .03, Friends: CFI = .97, TLI = .94, SRMR = .03) and item loadings ranged from .72 to .86. Additional CFAs testing measurement invariance in the family measure across Samples 1 and 2 yielded good fit for configural, metric, scalar, and strict invariance (CFIs = .96–.98, RMSEAs = .07–.10), with only the $\Delta\chi^2$ for strict invariance being significant (14.33, $p < .05$). More details for the CFAs are available in Table S1. All measures had strong internal consistency (α s: Sample 1, Family: .92; Sample 2, Family: .90, and Friends = 0.93).

Parent and peer support. Participants completed a modified version of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) that included nine items measuring the extent to which they received support separately by their parents and their peers. Using a scale that ranged from 1 ("Almost never") to 5 ("Almost always"), participants responded to items such as "My parents showed that he or she understands me," and "I could count on my friends when I needed to talk." This measure has been used in prior studies with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds and has consistently demonstrated high levels of internal reliability and predictive validity, predicting other aspects of family interactions (e.g., parental disclosure) and adolescent well-being (Gonzales, Deardorff, Formoso, Barr, & Barrera, 2006; Tsai, Telzer, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2015). The measure had high levels of internal consistency for both parents (α s: Sample 1 = .95; Sample 2 = .93) and friends (α s: Sample 1 = .95; Sample 2 = .93).

Psychological well-being. Participants completed measures of both negative and positive psychological well-being. The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression (CESD) scale (Lorr & McNair, 1971) included 20 items such as "You felt fearful" and "Your sleep was restless" to which participants responded from 1 ("Rarely or none of the time") to 4 ("Most or all of the time"), and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, &

Cutrona, 1980) included 20 items such as “How often do you feel close to people?” and “How often do you feel left out?” to which participants responded from 1 (“Never”) to 4 (“Always”). Participants also completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSE) scale (Rosenberg, 1989) in which they used a scale from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 4 (“Strongly agree”) to respond to 10 items such as “I certainly feel useless at times” and “I feel that I’m a person of worth,” and an eight-item measure of positivity (Diener, Larsen, Levine, & Emmons, 1985) in which they used a scale from 1 (“Very slightly or not at all”) to 5 (“Extremely”) to respond to items such as “Happy” and “Joyful.” Finally, participants used a 1 (“Almost never”) to 5 (“Almost always”) scale to complete a 5-item measure that assessed the presence of meaning in one’s life (e.g., “I understand my life’s meaning” and “My life has a clear sense of purpose”; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). All measures possessed good levels of internal consistency for both samples (α s: Sample 1: CESD = .93, Loneliness = .90, RSE = .87, Positivity = .95, Meaning Presence = .85; Sample 2: CESD = .91, Loneliness = .93, RSE = .92, Positivity = .95, and Meaning Presence = .92).

RESULTS

Analysis Plan

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with ethnicity, gender, parental education, and age as main effects examined group differences in feeling needed and useful. For Sample 2, the ANOVA included a within-person factor in order to compare the mean levels of feeling needed and useful by family and friends. Next, bivariate correlations between all measures were estimated. Finally, multiple regressions estimated the extent to which feeling needed and useful predicted well-being above-and-beyond parent and peer support and controlling for age, gender, ethnicity, and whether participants graduated from college. In order to correct for multiple testing in the regressions, we utilized a family-wise rate of $p < .05$ for each predictor across the five aspects of psychological being, thereby necessitating a significance level of $p < .01$ for each predictor.

Ethnicity, Gender, Parental Education, and Age

ANOVAs indicated that feeling needed and useful to the family or friends did not differ significantly according to ethnicity, gender, or parental

education in either Sample 1 (ethnicity: $F(4,218) = 0.47$, $p = .76$, $\eta^2 = .01$; gender: $F(1,218) = 0.03$, $p = .87$, $\eta^2 = .00$; parental education: $F(1,218) = 0.12$, $p = .73$, $\eta^2 = .01$) or Sample 2 (ethnicity: $F(4,282) = 1.41$, $p = .23$, $\eta^2 = .02$; gender: $F(1,282) = 0.99$, $p = .32$, $\eta^2 = .03$; parental education: $F(1,282) = 1.32$, $p = .25$, $\eta^2 = .01$). Increasing age was significantly associated a greater sense of feeling needed and useful by family in Sample 1 ($B(SE) = .07(.03)$, $F(1,218) = 4.90$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .02$) but not with either measure in Sample 2 (family: $B(SE) = .004(.05)$, $F(1,282) = 0.01$, $p = .95$, $\eta^2 = .00$; friends: $B(SE) = -.01(.05)$, $F(1,282) = 0.01$, $p = .91$, $\eta^2 = .00$).

The within-person factor in Sample 2 indicated that participants felt more needed and useful by their friends ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.99$) than by their family ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1,282) = 10.51$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

Associations with parent and peer support and psychological well-being

As shown in Table 2, bivariate correlations suggested consistently strong associations across both samples such that youth who reported higher levels of feeling needed and useful perceived more support from parents and peers ($r_s = .25$ to $.54$, $p_s < .01$ – $.001$), had lower levels of depressive symptoms and loneliness ($r_s = -.29$ to $-.63$, $p_s < .01$ – $.001$), and greater self-esteem, meaning, and positivity ($r_s = .42$ to $.60$, $p_s < .001$). Multiple regression analyses indicated that feeling needed and useful by both family and friends predicted psychological well-being above-and-beyond received support ($\beta_s = .20$ to $.54$, and $\beta_s = -.16$ to $-.50$, $p_s < .01$ with family-wise error correction; see Table 3). The only exceptions were that feeling needed and useful by friends did not significantly predict positivity and depressive symptoms above-and-beyond other predictors. For standard errors and confidence intervals of the unstandardized regression coefficients, see Table S2.

DISCUSSION

A more complete understanding of the role of social relationships during the transition to young adulthood should include the extent to which adolescents believe that others see them as needed and useful. Results from two separate samples suggest that feeling needed and useful by family and friends was generally similar across different

TABLE 2
Bivariate Correlations of Feeling Needed and Useful, Support, and Psychological Well-Being

	Needed Family	Needed Friends	Parent Support	Peer Support	Depressive Symptoms	Loneliness	Self-Esteem	Meaning Presence	Positivity
Needed Family									
Needed Friends	0.52**								0.60**
Parent Support	0.51**	0.33**							0.47**
Peer Support	0.25**	0.54**	0.17*						0.38**
Support									
Depressive Symptoms	-0.35**	-0.29**	-0.33**	0.05					-0.36**
Loneliness	-0.50**	-0.63**	-0.42**	-0.46**	0.57**				-0.56**
Self-Esteem	0.54**	0.51**	0.42**	0.21**	-0.65**	-0.68**			0.53**
Meaning Presence	0.45**	0.44**	0.38**	0.26**	-0.45**	-0.54**	0.68**		0.68**
Positivity	0.46**	0.42**	0.47**	0.27**	-0.55**	-0.53**	0.59**	0.55**	

Note. Correlations above the diagonal are for Sample 1, those below are for Sample 2. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

sociodemographic groups and predicted psychological well-being above-and-beyond receiving support in those same relationships. Future research on social relationships during the transition to young adulthood could benefit from incorporating assessments of feeling needed and useful by others, as well as exploring the activities and conditions that give rise to such perceptions.

The similar levels of feeling needed and useful across gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status suggest that even with group differences in the expectations placed upon adolescents (Hernández & Bámaca-Colbert, 2016), adolescents feel similarly needed and useful by their families and friends. The age increase in feeling needed by the family in Sample 1 was notable, given that the sample included a wider age range (i.e., 18–25 years) and more participants who had completed college. It is possible that the completion of schooling may make late adolescents better able to take on responsibilities and provide support to their families (Tsai, Telzer, & Fuligni, 2012). Feeling less needed and useful by the family at a younger age may have produced the greater reports of feeling needed by friends than family in Sample 2. Future studies should assess feeling needed and useful in both relationships in a broader age range in order to clarify this potentially interesting pattern across the transition to young adulthood.

The connection between support from parents and friends and feeling useful and needed in those relationships is consistent with the importance of mutuality in close relationships (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006). The finding that the associations held for feeling needed and useful by family as well as friends was notable, given how parent–child relationships are typically characterized as hierarchical with support flowing primarily from parents to adolescents (Youniss & Smollar, 1987). The results from this study join others that have highlighted the developmental significance of adolescents providing support back to their families at the transition to adulthood (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002).

Feeling needed useful by family and friends predicted multiple aspects of psychological well-being above-and-beyond perceived support in the same relationships. These findings highlight that the value of social relationships for the transition to young adulthood goes beyond just received social and emotional support to include the opportunity to be seen as needed and useful by

TABLE 3
Predicting Psychological Well-Being

	<i>Self Esteem</i> β	<i>Positivity</i> β	<i>Meaning Presence</i> β	<i>Loneliness</i> β	<i>Depressive Symptoms</i> β
Sample 1					
Needed Family	0.54*	0.48*	0.53*	-0.50*	-0.40*
Parent Support	0.05	0.23*	0.14	-0.08	0.004
Age	0.05	-0.06	0.02	0.07	-0.01
Female	0.04	-0.06	0.01	-0.09	-0.12
African American	0.07	-0.05	0.01	-0.03	0.01
Asian American	-0.02	-0.17*	-0.01	-0.03	0.01
European American	0.03	-0.16*	-0.12	-0.06	-0.05
Other/ Multiethnic	-0.01	-0.09	-0.11	0.02	0.08
College Graduate	-0.01	0.06	-0.06	-0.11	0.10
R^2	0.34*	0.43*	0.38*	0.33*	0.18*
Sample 2					
Needed Family	0.31*	0.20*	0.24*	-0.18*	-0.16*
Needed Friends	0.32*	0.15	0.23*	-0.36*	-0.15
Parent Support	0.16*	0.30*	0.18*	-0.18*	-0.18*
Friend Support	-0.03	0.12	0.05	-0.21*	0.05
Age	0.03	-0.04	0.06	-0.01	0.10
Female	-0.09	-0.06	0.01	0.09*	0.24*
African American	-0.07	-0.13*	-0.07	0.07	-0.10
Asian American	0.02	-0.09	0.04	-0.02	-0.04
European American	-0.09	-0.15*	-0.06	-0.03	-0.002
Other/ Multiethnic	-0.06	-0.10	-0.08	0.01	-0.03
College Graduate	-0.002	-0.01	0.06	0.02	-0.04
R^2	0.41*	0.35*	0.31*	0.50*	0.24*

Note. A family-wise rate of $p < .05$ for each predictor across the five aspects of psychological being within each sample was used, thereby necessitating a significance level of $p < .01$. * $p < .01$.

others (Fuligni, 2019). Additionally, the independent significance of feeling needed and useful by both family and friends underlines the unique importance of both types of social relationships during this period of transition (Aquilino, 1997; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

The replication of findings across two independent samples provides more confidence in the observed findings, but longitudinal designs could better assess the temporal dynamics and directionality of the observed cross-sectional associations. Broadening the samples to include more noncollege participants would allow for better generalizability as well as potentially better assessment of the types of activities by which adolescents make themselves needed and useful to others. Expanding to other domains—romantic relationships, schools, communities, and workplaces—could provide a richer understanding of the diverse ways in which late adolescents may feel needed and useful to their social worlds, as well as how taking on too many responsibilities may compromise some aspects of adjustment (e.g., college completion; Tseng, 2006). Assessing whether others in these settings view the

individuals as being needed and useful would provide valuable additional information to the perceptions of young adults themselves. Finally, although it is unknown how the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the responses of Sample 2, it is notable that the results replicated those observed in Sample 1 who completed the measures before the pandemic.

The importance of feeling needed and useful suggested by this study provides further support for the importance of providing adolescents with opportunities to contribute to their social worlds. In practice, efforts can be made to assess and enhance the extent to which relationships provide young adults with chances to give as well as receive support and assistance from close others. In doing so, attention should be paid the key social and psychological dynamics of giving and doing things for others that could influence the extent which adolescents feel needed and useful—such as the amount of help provided, whether that assistance is requested, and how it is acknowledged (Fuligni, 2019). At a time of life when adolescents are seeking to establish their role in the broader

social world, promoting the extent to which they feel needed and useful by others could be a key way to facilitate a successful transition into adulthood.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table S1 Confirmatory factor analysis loadings.

Table S2 Predicting psychological well being (unstandardized).