Hey, Look Ma, I Made It! College, Emerging Adulthood Development, and Quality of Parental Relationships

Sebastian Giarratana and Dr. Erin Koterba

University of Tampa

Introduction

Emerging Adulthood (EA), as conceptualized by Arnett (2004), marks a distinct and transformative phase spanning ages 18 to 29. It serves as a transitional period between adolescence and full adulthood, characterized by significant changes and opportunities. During this pivotal period, the influence of parents and familial dynamics are multilayered, affecting young adults' self-concept, mental health, and navigation through life's challenges. The current study was therefore designed to explore relationships between the characteristics of the stage of EA, family dynamics and parental warmth, physical proximity of parents, and self-concept. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the quality of parent-child relationships and familial warmth significantly impacts emerging adult development and self-concept. It also explores whether proximity to the parental home predicts the quality of family relationships during this transitional phase.

By examining these factors, we seek to provide a deeper understanding of how family dynamics contribute to the psychological development of emerging adults. The insights gained may offer implications for both academic and clinical settings, particularly in fostering supportive environments that enhance the well-being and growth of young adults during this formative life stage.

Literature Review

The Five Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood

EA is characterized by five key features: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, a sense of possibilities, and a feeling of being in-between (Arnett, 2004). First, it is a period marked by identity exploration, particularly in matters of love and career, where individuals delve into diverse possibilities to shape their understanding of self, capabilities, beliefs, and societal roles. Instability also characterizes EA, evident in frequent relocations driven by educational pursuits, job changes, or relationship dynamics. Such changes contribute to a transient lifestyle, often involving shifts between living in parental homes and living independently (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Moreover, EA signifies a self-focused phase, where individuals prioritize personal growth, exercise their own decision-making skills, and independent autonomy (Arnett, 2004). Importantly, this dimension showcases the transition from dependency on parents to self-agency in navigating life. In a similar manner, EA embodies a time when individuals harbor high levels of optimism and aspire to achieve great heights in the future (Arnett, 2004). This optimism

fuels confidence and hopefulness, shaping attitudes toward their pursuit of goals. These goals feed into the emerging adults' sense of possibilities – a realm where the broad horizons of potential life paths are met with eagerness to turn aspirations into reality. Lastly, this phase induces a feeling of being in-between, neither fully adolescent nor entirely adult, fostering a transitional mindset prevalent across Westernized cultures. As emerging adults navigate this in-between state, grappling with the responsibilities yet to be fully embraced, the role of parents shifts significantly, providing guidance and support through the transitions of this phase while simultaneously allowing the emerging adult more autonomy.

Parental Influence on Emerging Adults

During EA, parents play a pivotal role in supporting their children through life challenges and transitions. They serve as a foundation of emotional support and guidance, advising their offspring in crucial moments regarding career paths, relationships, and financial decisions (Arnett, 2004). While parents remain a source of assistance during this period, emerging adults also seek greater autonomy and independence, beginning to assert their own identities and making their own choices. Moreover, the dynamics within parent-child relationships during this phase significantly influence various aspects of emerging adults' lives, shaping their identity and the decision-making processes (Arnett, 2004). Recent research has focused on the evolving relationship between parental influence and emerging adult development, as well as how parents can effectively support their children as they navigate through college (Schiffrin et al., 2014). In this vein, familial acceptance is critical for the mental and physical health of young adults, highlighting the family's role in a supportive environment for identity development (Ryan et al., 2010). Likewise, familial support during this period plays a significant role in positive mental health outcomes for emerging adults (Arnett et al., 2014). Recognizing the profound impact of familial support on young adults' health, it is crucial to examine how this support extends beyond immediate well-being, fostering resilience and a positive approach to adulthood's challenges. This extended support helps shape emerging adults' capacity to navigate life's hurdles and transitions, reinforcing both psychological well-being and adaptive strategies for future development (Lan et al., 2019).

Parenting's Role in Shaping Emerging Adult Identity

The role of supportive and understanding parents is often integral to the psychological development of emerging adults, as it not only shapes their attitudes toward adulthood but also bolsters their psychological well-being, paving the way for a smoother transition into adult life (Finan & Ohannessian, 2018). Such acceptance and encouragement from parents instill positive feelings and healthy perceptions about adult life, thereby playing a pivotal role in the intricate process of maturation (Lindell et al., 2017). Additionally, positive and supportive parent-child relationships, along with parental support of autonomy, significantly contribute to emerging adults' sense of purpose and equip them with the skills to navigate life choices and establish meaningful goals (Hill et al., 2016). Positive parental engagement also extends its benefits into EA, improving emotional health and reducing the risk of mental illness (Chen et al., 2019). In contrast, psychologically controlling parenting hinders emerging adults' identity formation,

leading to difficulties in making committed choices and feeling certain about themselves and their life choices (Luyckx et al., 2007). While positive parenting aids emotional health and mental well-being, controlling parenting can have detrimental effects on self-discovery and confidence, emphasizing the significant influence of family atmosphere in nurturing a young adult's self-view and sense of value during this stage.

Familial Environment on Emerging Adults' Self-Perception

Warm and supportive family environments may foster positive self-perceptions, including elevated self-esteem and self-worth, underlining the pivotal role of familial support in shaping an individual's perception of themselves during this critical phase of development (Alegre & Benson, 2019). Family warmth has also been shown to predict the enhancement of social skills and interpersonal relationships, and a greater adeptness in navigating social scenarios effectively, highlighting the role of familial warmth in fostering emerging adults' social adaptability and relational competence. Conversely, parental psychological control has been found to have adverse effects on empathy during the transition from adolescence to EA. In fact, parental psychological control can attenuate the development of empathy, mediated by a diminished self-concept stemming from this control (Choe et al., 2020). Along these lines, emerging adults' perceptions of parenting styles significantly influence their psychological outcomes, particularly regarding autonomy, thus further emphasizing the enduring impact of family dynamics on individuals (McKinney & Kwan, 2018). When receiving parenting styles that grant autonomy, emerging adult males report lower levels of psychological problems, contrasting with females who report higher psychological problems, alluding to the mixed impact of parenting styles on emerging adults during these years.

Staying Home and Moving Away

Research has also emphasized the relationship between distance, contact, and affection among emerging adults and their parents; changes in one aspect, such as increased geographic distance during EA, may impact other dimensions of the parent-child relationship (Lawton et al., 1994). Therefore, transitions in geographic distance, like moving away for education or work opportunities, could potentially weaken bonds among emerging adults and their parents by reducing interaction frequency and potentially affecting emotional closeness. Moreover, this weakened relationship may cause this transitional period to be more turbulent for the emerging adult as they begin to navigate the unknown of their futures and not allow emerging adults to fully reap the benefits of a secure parental relationship (Aquilino, 1997). However, while the role of parents in supporting emerging adults in this developmental phase is well-established, little is known about the dynamics that shape the relationship between parents and their emerging adult children, and how these dynamics impact the psychological development of the latter.

Self-Concept in Emerging Adulthood Development

For emerging adults, a positive self-concept is essential as it not only impacts mental health but also acts as a crucial determinant in managing depression, stress, and identity stability. Self-concept is not only fundamental to emerging adults' mental health but also acts as a predictive factor for depression, where the clarity and positivity of one's self-view can mitigate or

exacerbate mental health issues (Reed-Fitzke, 2020). In a similar manner, self-concept has been linked to psychological distress, suggesting that a well-defined self-concept serves as a buffer against stressors commonly encountered during this life stage (Schiller et al., 2016). Additionally, a well-defined self-concept can aid in stabilizing one's identity amidst the evolving social roles experienced during this time of instability (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010). As emerging adults navigate this developmental phase, the strength and clarity of their self-concept not only touch upon mental health outcomes but also help them withstand the stressors of shifting social roles. In this context, the nature of their relationship with parents—shaped by factors like proximity and emotional connection—plays a significant role. Shifts such as moving away for college or work can alter this dynamic, potentially disrupting the established support system and adding complexity to the already challenging process of forging their path into the future (Fang et al., 2021).

The Current Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how the quality of parent-child relationships and familial warmth impacts emerging adult development and self-concept. In addition, we sought to explore whether distance from the parental home predicts the quality of family relationships during this critical transitional phase. It was hypothesized that better trust and communication with parents was linked to a healthier self-concept and EA development. Conversely, feelings of alienation were expected to hinder self-concept and contribute to negative EA experiences. Furthermore, we expected that perceptions of family warmth and support are associated with a positive self-concept and favorable EA outcomes. Our study also examined whether proximity to home was beneficial, hypothesizing that increased proximity enhances EA development and improves the quality of parent-child relationships.

Method

Participants

One hundred and ninety-two individuals (124 females, 67 males, and one nonbinary) participated in the present study with ages ranging from 18 to 23 years old (M_{age} = 19.6, SD = .9). The majority of participants were sophomores (56.5%), with first-year students (20.4%), juniors (14.7%), and seniors (8.4%) the next most common groups, respectively. Participants were recruited through two primary means: introductory psychology courses administered by the university and social media. Participants recruited through the psychology courses (N = 192) were compensated through academic course credit. Participants recruited through psychology courses earned 1 credit towards their course requirement by participating in the study. Ethical guidelines set by a nationally accredited research ethics board were followed, and the study was deemed IRB exempt.

Materials and Procedure

Surveys were completed online. First, participants reported demographic information, including gender, age, and college year. They also disclosed the distance they lived from their parents by car, rounding to the nearest hour (e.g., "*An hour or less*, *2-3 hours*, *4-5 hours*, etc."). This

information was then used to differentiate between those who had easy access to return home and those for whom the journey would be more challenging. A travel time of five hours or less by car was coded as being able to drive home easily; driving durations exceeding five hours were coded as not being able to drive home easily.

Next, participants completed a series of questionnaires aimed at assessing their feelings toward the transitory themes of emerging adulthood, relationships with parents, their self-concept, and the relative warmth in their family of origin. First, participants completed the Inventory of the Dimension of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA; Reifman et al., 2016), a 31-item questionnaire measuring the five dimensions of emerging adulthood (identity exploration, experimentation/possibilities, negativity/instability, self-focus, and feeling in-between). It also assesses a sixth construct, being focused on others. Participants rate a series of statements on a scale of 1 = *strongly disagree,* 4 = *strongly agree* in terms of how representative their statements are of this period in their lives. An example item includes asking participants whether this period was a time of "finding out who you are".

Second, participants' perceptions of their relationships with their parents were gauged using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Gullone & Robinson, 2005), which measures three broad constructs: trust, communication, and alienation. The IPPA is a 28 item self-report scale with response options ranging on a three-point scale (1 = *always true*, 3 = *never true*). Example items include: "My parents listen to my opinions," "I can count on my parents when I need to talk about a problem," and "I don't get much attention at home."

Next, participants answered the Self-Concept Self Report Scale (SCSR; Combs et al., 1963), an 18-item measure designed to evaluate their views of their self-concept. Each item includes positively and negatively worded words on a five-point scale (e.g., 1 = *"People like to have me around,"* 5 = *"People don't care if I'm there or not"*)

Finally, participants' perceptions of familial warmth and/or supportive acts made by members of their family were measured using the Family Warmth and Supportiveness Measure (FAM; Walls & Whitbeck, 2012). The scale consists of six items total and are scored on a three-point scale, with higher scores indicative of greater perceived familial support (0 = *never*, 2 = *always*). An example item includes: "Can you talk to someone in your family when you have a problem and figure out how to deal with it?"

The reliability of the questionnaires used in the study was confirmed through prior research. The IDEA demonstrated good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .80 (Reifman et al., 2016). The IPPA also showed strong reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .85 for the trust subscale, .82 for communication, and .77 for alienation (Gullone & Robinson, 2005). The SCSR and FAM scales exhibited acceptable coefficients, with Cronbach's alpha of .78 and .81, respectively (Combs et al., 1963; Walls & Whitbeck, 2012).

Results
This study was designed to examine the relationship between development during EA, self-concept, and parent-child relationships. Analyses were designed to examine connections between

family dynamics and self-concept, family dynamics and the dimensions of emerging adulthood, as well as family dynamics and proximity to the parental home.

Family Dynamics and Self-Concept

Our first set of analyses examined the link between family dynamics and self-concept. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the associations between self-concept, parental attachment (trust, communication, alienation), and familial warmth. A series of significant results were found between parental attachment and self-concept. Higher levels of trust facilitated better outcomes for the self-concept of emerging adults, $r(190) = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$. A similar pattern emerged for self-concept and parental communication, $r(190) = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$; higher levels of communication with parents were linked to a more developed self-concept. Conversely, higher levels of perceived alienation within the parent-child relationship were associated with a less developed self-concept $r(190) = -0.52$, $p < 0.01$. A connection between self-concept and familial warmth was observed, $r(190) = 0.55$, $p < 0.05$, with higher levels of familial warmth predicting a more developed self-concept.

Family Dynamics and Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood

We next examined the connection between EA characteristics and family relationships. Table 1 presents correlations between the dimensions of EA, parental attachment, and familial warmth. As is evident in the table, a series of significant results appeared, indicating that dimensions of EA were correlated with various family dynamics. Interestingly, familial warmth was significantly tied to four dimensions of EA. Specifically, higher levels of familial warmth correlated with increased levels of self-focus, identity exploration, experimentation, possibilities, feeling-in-between, and other-focus. However, no significant relationship was found between negativity/instability and familial warmth. The observed pattern indicates that higher levels of familial warmth are associated with positive aspects of EA, including increased self-focus, identity exploration, experimentation, feeling in-between, and other-focus, emphasizing the significant role of supportive family relationships in shaping this developmental stage. The lack of a significant relationship between familial warmth and negativity/instability suggests that while warmth within family relationships positively influences various dimensions of EA, it may not directly buffer feelings of negativity or instability experienced by individuals during this stage.

Similarly, strong parental trust during EA was characterized by more self-focus, experimentation, possibilities, feeling in between, and identity exploration (see Table 1). Additionally, trust also showed a buffering relationship with feelings of negativity and instability during EA, lowering that characteristic when parental bonds were stronger. No significant relationship was found between parental trust and emerging adults being other-focused. Strong parental communication was also associated with more self-focus, feeling in-between, identity exploration, and experimentation and possibilities. No significant relationships emerged between parental communication, negativity and instability, and other-focus. The observed pattern suggests that parental communication fosters heightened self-focus, feelings of being in-between, identity exploration, and openness to experimentation. However, the absence of significant

correlations between parental communication and negativity, instability, or other-focused orientation suggests that while communication may influence certain dimensions, it may not directly impact all aspects of EA.

　　　In a similar manner, parental alienation was linked to the dimensions of EA, indicating that as emerging adults experience higher levels of alienation, their self-focus diminishes, and experimentation and possibilities decrease. Heightened parental alienation correlates with increased feelings of negativity and instability throughout this developmental period. No statistically significant results were found for identity exploration and being focused on others.

Table 1

Correlations Between the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood, Trust, Communication, Alienation, and Familial Warmth.

Variable	Trust	Communication	Alienation	Familial Warmth	*M, SD*
Identity Exploration	.16**	.18**	-0.11	.28**	3.5, .46
Experimentation & Possibilities	.20**	.16**	-.15*	.27**	3.6, .46
Negativity/Instability	-0.16*	-0.05	-0.18*	-0.03	3.1, .47
Other-Focused	0.05	0.1	0.11	.20**	2.4, .70
Self-Focused	.25**	.22**	-0.18*	.31**	3.5, .46
Feeling In-Between	.19**	.20**	0.11	.25**	3.5, .57

*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

　　　Family Dynamics and Proximity to Home

In our next set of analyses, we examined the connection between parental relationships and geographical proximity to home. An independent sample t-test was conducted to explore the relationships between trust, communication, and proximity to home. Figure 1 depicts the mean scores measuring proximity to home and family dynamics. As the Figure shows, a trend toward significance emerged suggesting that participants who could drive home easily demonstrated greater trust ($N = 35$, $M = 2.6$, $SD = 0.4$) compared to those who could not ($N = 155$, $M = 2.7$, $SD = 0.4$), $t(183) = -2.05$, $p = .07$. Additionally, those who could drive home easily ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 0.4$) exhibited better communication with their parents than those who could not ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 0.4$), $t(172.72) = -1.82$, $p = .04$. However, no significant differences emerged in levels of alienation between those who could drive home easily ($M = 1.6$, $SD = .46$) and those who could not ($M = 1.6$, $SD = .49$), $t(154.6) = -.187$, $p = .426$. Similarly, familial warmth did not hold significance between those who could drive home easily ($M = 2.5$, $SD = .38$) and those who could not ($M = 2.5$, $SD = .36$) based on distance from home, $t(167.29) = -.740$, $p = .231$.

Figure 1.

T-tests Measuring Proximity to Home and Family Dynamics
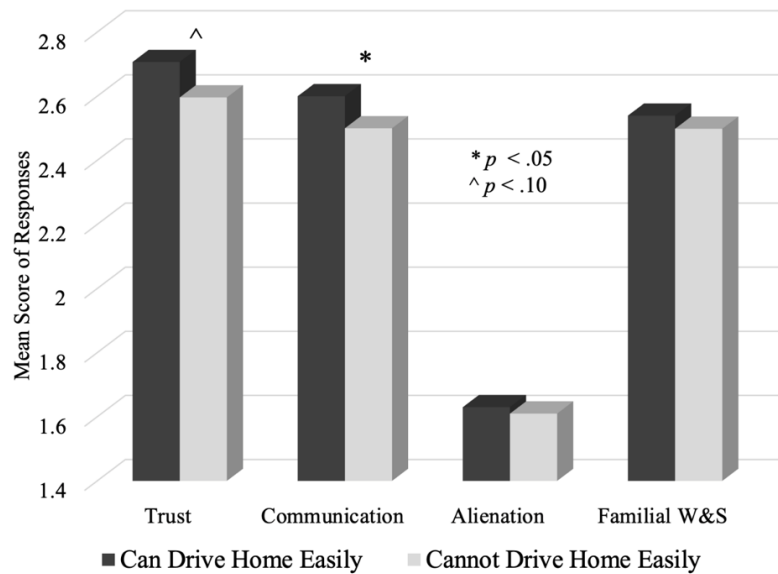
Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to examine the connections between familial warmth, psychological development during EA, and self-concept. An additional goal was to explore whether proximity to the parental home predicts the quality of family relationships during this transitional phase. Our results suggest that family relationships during EA indeed affect development and self-concept in multifaceted ways.

  Family Dynamics and Self-Concept

Consistent with our hypothesis, we found significant correlations between parental attachment and self-concept among emerging adults. Specifically, higher levels of trust and communication with parents were positively associated with a more developed self-concept, while increased feelings of alienation within the parent-child relationship were negatively correlated with self-concept. Parental attachment may serve as a reflective mirror, as emerging adults often calibrate their self-views against the backdrop of their parental relationships (Wider et al., 2016). Trust and communication with parents have been positively associated with a more coherent and positive self-concept (Robinson et al., 2013). This reflection may be especially pronounced during a stage where identity is actively constructed and refined and parental support and communication aid in the development of emerging adults' self-concepts (Wang, 2019). Conversely, our results also underscore the detrimental impact of perceived alienation on self-concept development. Feelings of alienation within the parent-child relationship are seen as developmental disruptors. Alienation may interrupt key developmental tasks, such as autonomy and self-identity formation, suggesting a profound psychosocial impact (Cornellà-Font et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2014).

While alienation can disrupt an individual's developmental progress, the presence of familial warmth appears to be significantly beneficial. Our results suggest that family environment plays an instrumental role in the developing sense of self, with warmth serving as a catalyst for fostering a defined self-concept (Dameron & Goeke-Morey, 2023). Familial warmth may emerge as a potent resource for resilience, providing an environment that fosters a healthy self-concept (Dameron & Goeke-Morey, 2023). This warmth acts as an emotional anchor, aiding the individual's ability to navigate the inherent challenges of this life stage. The research also suggests a transactional dynamic where not only do parents influence their children, but the emerging self-concept of the individual in turn affects the parental relationship (Guarnieri et al., 2015). Moreover, the longitudinal impacts of these familial influences on life trajectories imply that the benefits of positive parental attachments may extend well beyond EA (Schiller et al., 2016). The study's finding that familial warmth and positive parent-child relationships significantly influence the developmental trajectories and self-perceptions of emerging adults suggests that supportive family environments provide a foundation during this transitional phase. Emerging adults who perceive warmth and support from their families may therefore be likely to experience smoother transitions into adulthood, as they feel secure and confident in their relationships, which may positively impact their self-esteem, identity formation, and overall well-being.

Family Dynamics and Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood

As predicted, our findings revealed significant associations between family dynamics and various dimensions of EA. Higher levels of familial warmth were correlated with increased levels of self-focus, identity exploration, experimentation, and possibilities, feeling-in-between, and other-focus. This could be attributed to the fluid nature of family relationships during this period and its effect as a grounding force that fosters individual growth in EA (Oliveira et al., 2020). We also found that greater exploration was associated with parental trust and communication, which underscores the importance of positive parent-child relationships in fostering adaptive behaviors and attitudes during this transitional phase.

Conversely, we observed an association linking heightened parental alienation to decreased self-focus, experimentation, and heightened negativity, underscoring the detrimental effects of negative family dynamics on the developmental trajectories of emerging adults (Verhaar et al., 2022). Strong parental attachment may serve as a source of stability and security for emerging adults as they navigate the challenges of identity exploration, career decisions, and interpersonal relationships. Secure parental relationships may provide a haven from which individuals can confidently explore adulthood (Sneed et al., 2007). The observed negative impacts of perceived alienation and negative family dynamics highlight the potential pitfalls of dysfunctional family relationships during EA. Feeling alienated from one's family or experiencing negative family dynamics may hinder the development of autonomy, self-concept, and emotional well-being. Such experiences may exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and instability, making it difficult for emerging adults to establish a sense of identity and navigate their transition into adulthood effectively (Johnson et al., 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

While our study provides valuable insights into the connections between family dynamics, psychological development, and self-concept during EA, it is not without limitations. Future research utilizing longitudinal designs is needed to better understand the long-term effects of family dynamics on the developmental trajectories of emerging adults. Additionally, our sample consisted primarily of undergraduate students from a single university, limiting the generalizability of our findings. Future studies should aim to replicate our findings using more diverse samples to ensure the robustness and generalizability of our results.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the integral role of family dynamics in the psychological development and self-concept formation during EA. The link between parental warmth and self-concept underscores the importance of a nurturing family environment during this formative life stage. Our findings reveal that strong parental attachment and familial warmth contribute significantly to positive self-concept development, while parental alienation can hinder the maturation of a stable identity. These dynamics are not unidirectional; the evolving self-concept of the emerging adult also plays a part in shaping the family relationship.

Our research also draws attention to the impact of these relationships on various dimensions of EA. Warm, supportive family interactions correlate with a higher propensity for exploration and a stronger sense of resilience in the face of the challenges characteristic of this life phase. In contrast, the presence of negative family dynamics, such as feelings of alienation from one's family, can adversely affect an individual's journey toward autonomy and stability.

In sum, our study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of family relationships, psychological growth, and the shaping of the self-concept in EA. It highlights the nature of familial support as a foundational element for healthy psychological development, while also pointing to the potential consequences of familial dynamics during this critical period of identity formation. This knowledge could be useful in devising strategies and interventions to support emerging adults through their unique developmental challenges, fostering resilience, and psychological well-being that can assist them throughout their adult lives.

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