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Family support in the transition to adulthood in Portugal – Its effects on identity capital development, uncertainty management and psychological well-being

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ABSTRACT

In a familistic southern European society such as the Portuguese, the family has historically played a prominent role in supporting the negotiation of transition pathways into adulthood. The present study aimed at capturing (1) the relative weight of parental financial support and autonomy support in contributing to the youngsters' psychological well-being (PWB), and (2) the mediating role of identity capital and uncertainty management in this relationship. A total of 620 participants completed measures of parental support, identity capital, uncertainty management and PWB. Autonomy support was found to be the strongest predictor of PWB, both directly and indirectly through its effects on identity capital and the use of target focused uncertainty management strategies. Conversely, financial support evidenced only a minor indirect impact through the mediation of tangible identity capital. Autonomy stimulation may constitute one of the most developmentally determinant family challenges in assisting the process of coming of age in Portugal.

The transition to adulthood in Portugal

In the last decades, the process of transition to adulthood has suffered profound changes in Portugal, converging to the patterns of other western societies (e.g., longer educational paths, delay in the assumption of conjugal and parental roles). Nevertheless, due to structural frailties – "unfinished modernization" (Machado & Costa, 1998) – and cultural factors (e.g., the prevalence of familistic values), coming of age in Portugal presents specificities, especially shared by other Southern European countries. It generally implies a prolonged co-residence with parents, late transitions to a conjugal union (Billari, 2004) and parenthood. Thus, when compared to other European regions, the Southern pattern has been distinguished by its greater extension and reliance on family solidarity. It is characterized by a phase of explorations and micro-transitions inside the parental home, followed by a phase of greater commitments and macro-transitions outside the parental home (Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2007; Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006).

The extension of time in education is a key factor for understanding changes in the transition to adulthood in Portugal. Since the end of the political dictatorship in April 1974, compulsory education gradually passed from four to twelve years.

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Simultaneously, higher education was subject to a certain degree of massification. Taking into account the gross schooling rate in Portugal as far as higher education is concerned, figures show that there has been an increase from 10.7% in 1980 to 54.6% in 2012 (Pordata, 2014). Investing in the child's higher education has been a strategy used by Portuguese families to attain social mobility, which led to significant transformations in the life styles of young Portuguese (Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2005, 2007; Pais, 2001, 2002). Hence, going to university not only has delayed young people's transition to adulthood but has also contributed to the emergence of "choice biographies", consubstantiating an increasing individualization and de-standardization of the life course (e.g., Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2005, 2007; Pais, 2001; Shanahan, 2000). However, this investment in education and in training programs has not been followed by an easy transition into the labor market. In recent years, unemployment rates (presently 37.7% for young people up to 25 years) and low-paid precarious work contracts increased sharply (Pordata, 2013a), independently of young people's educational credentials. Yet, and despite this phenomenon, youngsters that go through higher education seem to be slightly better positioned to negotiate a more favorable transition into the labor market. In fact, statistical figures show that the overall unemployment rate (regardless of age of the individual) for those who have maximum educational credentials at the level of secondary education reaches 17.2%, as compared to 12.9% for those who have taken a University degree (Pordata, 2013b).

Thus, many young Portuguese circulate in a "gray area" of "floating occupations" (Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2005, 2007). School to work linear transitions have given rise to "yo–yo" trajectories (Biggart & Walther, 2006; Pais, 2002) where periods of precarious employment intercalate with periods of unemployment and eventual return to educational training.

In a country with weak welfare policies (characteristic of southern European states), it is the family who assumes the major financial responsibility of their adult children – "family welfare regimes" (Vogel, 2002). Thus, for many young Portuguese the dependence on family financial support has turned into a "destiny" due to the impossibility of alternative options, even when they have initiated their professional life (Mauratti, Martins, & Costa, 2004). Beyond the scarcity of public-financed services, the importance of the family in Portugal is reinforced by its Catholic heritage and communalistic ethic, which leads to intense family ties and responsibilities (Gal, 2010; Moreno, 2013; Van de Velde, 2008). In this way, the transition to adulthood tends to be perceived as a "joint developmental enterprise" (e.g., Scabini et al., 2006) – as it usually occurs under "parental roof" or depends on its resources. Thus, parents still perform an influential role in defining the "right time" and the "right way" to move into adult roles (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Nico, 2010; Scabini et al., 2006; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013).

Managing the transition

As the range of possible paths to adulthood extends, this transition process becomes more open, complex and uncertain (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2006; du Bois-Reymond, 2009; du Bois-Reymond & Chisholm, 2006; Côté, 2000, 2006; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2008; Heinz, 2009; Hendry & Kloep, 2007, 2012; Leccardi, 2005, 2006). In the absence of social norms that universally define the steps that are to be taken in the path to adulthood, a successful transition that fosters a sense of self-fulfillment and well-being requires the youngster to develop a repertoire of personal resources to compensate for the lack of external social structure (Côté, 2000; Côté & Allahar, 1994). The development of such a repertoire, in the context of Southern European countries, such as Portugal, is expected to depend on family support (Scabini et al., 2006; Swartz & O'Brien, 2009). What remains to be studied is how these personal resources and family support translate into navigational strategies. Since transition paths are weaved in a context of uncertainty that permeates all dimensions of young people's lives, we hypothesize that these navigational strategies greatly depend on the use of uncertainty management strategies. The main aim of the present study is precisely to address how family support and personal resources influence uncertainty management strategies used by these youngsters as they navigate into adulthood, and how the use of those strategies impact on their psychological well-being.

Personal resources, uncertainty management strategies and the family support that may foster and sustain them will be briefly described in the following sections.

Family support

Family support can be conceptualized as being more instrumental or psychological in nature. Instrumental support would encompass visible socio-economic assistance that could take the form of financial assistance, or the advantages that could be derived from the family's human, social, economic and cultural capital inherent to its socioeconomic status. On its turn, family psychological support, in this phase of young people's lives, would encompass aspects such as autonomy support, understanding and accepting the youngsters' life circumstances.

Regarding the more socially visible or instrumental family support, research on families in Europe shows that financial support permits youngsters to take the risks associated to a more exploratory and experimental phase in their lives, and to profit from more options, since it functions as a shield against young people's economic instability (e.g., Brannen, 2006; Cook & Furstenberg, 2002; Kohli, 1999; Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Scabini et al., 2006; Swartz & O'Brien, 2009). In fact, research on European families shows that a substantial proportion of young adults receive financial support from their parents (e.g., Brannen, 2006; Kohli, 1999). On the one hand, given the growing extension of the transition to adulthood life phase and its more unstructured nature, youngsters nowadays seem to require more material support as compared to previous generations; on the other hand, their parents have more resources to share and use in the support of the transition process due to