



## “Family Comes First!” Relationships with family and friends in Italian emerging adults



Elisabetta Crocetti <sup>a,\*</sup>, Wim Meeus <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

We conducted two studies to examine relationships with family and friends in Italian emerging adults, paying attention to the potential moderating role of gender and occupational status. In Study I, we aimed at capturing emerging adults' perspective on interactions with both family and friends by means of a qualitative approach. Participants were 39 emerging adults (51% males), who were interviewed individually or within a focus group. In Study II, we sought to examine how family and friend importance to identity were related to life satisfaction through a quantitative approach. Participants were 474 (47.3% males) emerging adults who filled a self-report questionnaire. Overall, findings indicated solid family ties and a strong impact of family importance to identity for life satisfaction. Results were independent of gender and occupational status (university students vs. workers). Thus, findings highlighted that in the Italian context young people's transition to adulthood is strongly intertwined with family relationships.

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### Introduction

In the last few decades, the lives of young people in Europe (as in other industrialized countries) have changed radically (e.g., [Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011](#); [Leccardi, 2006](#)). The most relevant changes include a progressive deferral of transition into adult roles, such as transition to living independently, stable full-time work, marriage, and parenthood (e.g., [Aassve, Arpino, & Billari, 2013](#); [Arnett, 2006](#); [Billari & Liefbroer, 2010](#)). As a result, the period between adolescence and adulthood changed from a brief transitional phase to a specific period of the life span that covers approximately the third decade of life (e.g., [Tanner & Arnett, 2009](#)).

In this context, [Arnett \(2000\)](#) proposed *emerging adulthood* as a new conception of development for the period from the late teens through the twenties. According to [Arnett's \(2004\)](#) theory emerging adulthood is defined as the age of *identity exploration*, of trying out various possibilities before enacting firm adult commitments; the age of *instability*, when the possibility to explore a large array of alternatives can be exalting but also distressing and confusing; a *self-focused* period of the life stage, in which individuals are not subjected to restrictions of adolescence and are free from obligations and responsibilities of adulthood; the age of *feeling in-between*, when individuals feel they are no longer adolescents but not yet fully

\* Corresponding author. Research Centre Adolescent Development, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 1, 3584CS Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 30 253 4039.

E-mail address: [e.crocetti@uu.nl](mailto:e.crocetti@uu.nl) (E. Crocetti).

adults; and the age of *possibilities*, in which people tend to view their personal futures hopefully, even amidst the difficult economic conditions challenging their generation as a whole.

Emerging adulthood is a period characterized by substantial changes and diversity. For instance, in this period of the life span individuals may undergo several changes in their residential status (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994), alternating living with parents, living with friends in university dormitories or apartments, and/or cohabitating with a romantic partner. These changes reflect the exploratory nature of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Changes occur also in the social network of emerging adults. In particular, it has been observed that relationships with parents tend to improve in the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 1997, 2006; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Lefkowitz, 2005; Shulman & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Van Wel, 1994; Van Wel, terBogt, & Raaijmakers, 2002). For instance, Lefkowitz (2005) found that about three quarters of college students mentioned that after the transition to university the quality of relationships with their parents changed in a positive way. Main changes include increasing levels of mutuality, having more open communication, and having more appreciation and respect for one's parents. So, the transitions to university catalyse positive changes in the quality of parent–child relationships, whereas less is known about changes in quality of parental relationships for those who enter directly in the labour market without undertaking university education.

A part from parental relationships, also relationships with friends might undergo a redefinition during emerging adulthood. While a wide literature has unravelled characteristics of relationships with friends in adolescence (e.g., Brown & Larson, 2009 for a review), less attention has been devoted to friendships in emerging adulthood. However, in addition to family, friends might also support emerging adults in navigating through adolescence towards adulthood (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). In fact, emerging adults and their friends share similar developmental tasks, such as transition from high school to university, transition from university to work, transition from singleness to stable partnerships, etc. Being involved at the same time with one or multiple life transitions, emerging adults and their friends can share information and emotions and provide each other with support and aid. This mutual exchange can be particularly relevant when young people face challenging tasks such as unemployment and job insecurity. Thus, it is important to further study quality of relationships with both family and friends in emerging adulthood.

A strong focus has been put on cultural influences in experiencing of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2010). In fact, the ways in which young people navigate through adolescence towards adulthood and their experiences during this period vary largely according to the macro cultural context in which they live and the social groups they belong to. In line with these considerations, in this article we focused specifically on relationships with family and friends in Italian emerging adults.

### *The Italian context*

In the Mediterranean countries, transition to adulthood occurs within the family context (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). In fact, whereas in the US and in North European countries emerging adults are expected to leave home in their early twenties, in the Mediterranean area young people tend to live with their parents for a longer time (e.g., Aassve, Billari, Mazzucco, & Ongaro, 2002). In this context, the concept of Mediterranean 'familism' has been proposed to explain the demographic and social policy distinctiveness of Southern Europe, where the family plays a central role in the welfare system, acting as the main provider of care and welfare for children and dependent individuals (Banfield, 1958; Ferrera, 1996, 1997; León & Migliavacca, 2013; Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013; Moreno Mínguez, 2010; Saraceno, 2003). Thus, family represents the main social safety net that supports emerging adults in facing challenges related to transition to work in a context characterized by high levels of job insecurity and unemployment. Parents support their children mainly through prolonged co-residence and children are expected to leave the parental home only after completing their educational career, finding a stable job, and marrying (Albertini & Kohli, 2013).

Italy is a prototype of this situation, with a very high percentage of emerging adults living with their family (Aassve, Billari, & Ongaro, 2001; Billari, Rosina, Ranaldi, & Clelia Romano, 2008). The Italian Institute of Statistics (Istat, 2010) reported that in 2009, 92.4% of males and 85.68% of females aged 20–24 years lived with their nuclear families. Further, among 25–29 year-olds, 7 out of 10 males and 5 out of 10 females still lived at home. Data provided by the European Union (2012) indicated that Italian young people are likely to leave the parental house between 28 and 30.9 years, thus much later than their peers from centre and north Europe.

Scabini and Donati (1988) proposed a conceptualization, "the long family of the young adult", to stress that in Italy the transition to adulthood is no longer an individual transition, but a joint transition involving both parents and their children (Scabini & Iafrate, 2003; Scabini et al., 2006). This typical Italian situation is partly due to the limits of the welfare system in which, compared to other European countries, social policies (such as public expenditure for families and children) towards younger generations are limited.<sup>1</sup> However, a careful analysis reveals that economic difficulties explain only part of this phenomenon. Indeed, there is a group of emerging adults who, although they have the financial security necessary to live independently and form a new family, still postpone the transition to adulthood and continue to live with their parents (Buzzi, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> According to OECD (2013) data, in Italy in 2009 public spending on family benefits in cash, services and tax measures was 1.58% of Gross Domestic Product. This percentage was rather below the OECD average (i.e., 2.6%) and also substantially lower than the percentage of other European countries (e.g., Ireland, 4.24%; France, 3.94%; Denmark, 3.90%; Germany, 3.07%).

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