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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Paths to Adult Identity Resolution – At the Intersection of Agency and Structure: A Differential Study Among Portuguese Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary Western individualized societies, identity capital theory has identified a set of psychosocial assets indispensable for the negotiation of opportunities and risks inherent to the process of transition to adulthood. From among the various identity capital resources, this study focuses on agentic capacities, as one of the most valuable due to their motivational power, and school paths, as a powerful structural determinant of transition to adulthood trajectories. In order to better understand the anticipation of adult roles, two studies were carried out with Portuguese youths ($N=346$, aged between 18 and 30 years) aiming to (1) observe differences in agentic capacities (measured by their levels of self-efficacy beliefs, expectations of success concerning the performance of adult roles, and exploration of worldviews and adult roles) and adult identity resolution according to the youths' level of education; (2) assess the predictive power of youths' agentic capacities in adult identity resolution, examining variations according to the level of education. Differences according to level of education were found regarding identity resolution with less educated youths evidencing higher levels of adult identity resolution. As far as the predictive power of agentic capacities over identity resolution is concerned, it was observed that the type and amount of identity capital that is relevant for the acquisition of a sense of adult maturity varies according to educational level of emerging adults.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, self-efficacy, expectations of success, exploration, level of education, identity resolution

Introduction

During recent decades, several socio-cultural changes occurring in Western industrialized societies in the process of transition to adulthood have led to the proposal of a new phase in the life course framed between adolescence and young adulthood, which has been termed by Arnett^{1,2,3} *emerging adulthood*. This new phase is characterized by five main distinctive features^{1,3,59}: Identity exploration in the spheres of love and work, optimism, instability, heightened self-focus, and a sense of feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood. About thirty years ago, the vast majority of young people began assuming adult roles and responsibilities both in the work and family spheres early in their third decade of life (between 20 and 24 years of age). Assumption of such roles was, then, a clear marker of the transition to adulthood. During the last three decades, this scenario has undergone a profound change. The exponential increase in the number of young people attending higher education as well as the volatility and uncertainty of the labor market has led to a delay of about a decade in the attainment of stable working positions as well as in the assumption of conjugal and parental roles⁶⁶. As a consequence, for a growing proportion of the population, the third decade of life is now devoted to exploratory activities and experimentation pertinent to ensuing adult commitments. The task of constructing a viable adult identity, seen by Erikson^{36,37,63} as typical of adolescence, has begun to extend for a period of almost a decade more devoted to identity exploration, which delays identity resolution for an equal period^{23-27,29-32}.

Accompanying this time extension, the criteria for attaining adult status have also changed and become more subjective in nature. According to Arnett^{1,3}, these now essentially consist of accepting responsibility for one's own actions, independent decision-making, and financial independence. These new criteria for the definition of adult status are tied to the increased levels of anomie, coupled with a social process of compulsive individualization^{10-14,25,30,31} characteristic of our late modern societies. Accordingly, most social institutions are proving incapable of providing a sense of structure and organization to the transition process. Coming of age has become an increasingly individualized endeavor dependent on the youths' biographical decisions.

Taking into account these new challenges to the process of coming of age, Côté^{23,24-26,31} introduced the concept of *identity capital* to denominate the psychosocial resources needed for a successful transition to adulthood. The link between these assets or resources and identity

consolidation comes from a conceptualization of *emerging adulthood* as an extension of the institutionalized moratorium associated with the developmental task of identity resolution: A privileged period for the development of the resources needed for a successful transition to adulthood through identity consolidation^{23,25,26,51}. Within the framework of this theory, identity capital resources can be either tangible or intangible. Tangible resources refer to extrinsic aspects such as financial capacity, belonging to certain social groups, socio-economic status (SES), and educational credentials. Intangible resources refer to a diversified portfolio of intrinsic psychosocial skills endowing youths with the necessary resources to become intelligent strategists in navigating the paths of transition to adulthood. In a social context marked by high levels of uncertainty, unpredictability, and instability¹⁰⁻¹⁴, the development of tangible and intangible resources is expected to determine the individual's ability to exercise control over his/her journey into adulthood and to benefit from the structural networks available in the socio-cultural context. In a scenario of compulsive individualization, the development of identity capital will influence the quality of the transition trajectory in terms of personal growth. In this respect, according to Côté²³⁻²⁶, entering adulthood through a path of developmental individualization, involves the pro-active use of strategies for personal growth towards the development of viable and personally meaningful life projects in adult life (as opposed to a path of *default individualization*, determined by circumstances and impulses, with little exercise of agentic capacities).

Socio-cultural influences and conditions in the transition to adulthood process: coming of age in Portugal

The process of transition to adulthood in Portugal seems to present the same high levels of insecurity and uncertainty characteristic of most contemporary Western societies^{4,41,53-55,58}. A continuous postponement of the entrance into full adulthood has been observed in the last 20 years. The third decade of life, for a growing proportion of the youth population, is being devoted to identity exploration in the fields of work and romantic relationships. Academic and occupational trajectories are characterized by ever more frequent "yo-yo" transitions⁵⁵: With periods of employment intercalating with periods of unemployment, and return to educational training in order to increase the chances of finding a place in an increasingly demanding labor market. Family

and housing transitions also materialize in “boomerang” trajectories⁵⁵, as a tendency for youths to often return to the parents’ house when economic difficulties are experienced during a period of living on their own. The high percentage of youths living with their parents during the transitional phase, in southern European countries, allows us to speak about a Mediterranean model of transition: Transition to adulthood tends to be a familial “joint developmental enterprise”^{41,47,60,68}. Given the lack of state support to the transition process, the family constitutes the sole support system emerging adults have at their disposal to help them negotiate opportunities and overcome the obstacles that may appear in their path to adulthood.

The impact of the length of academic trajectories on the transition process: assessing differences between emerging adults who pursue higher education and the forgotten half.

Despite the relevant role of agentic capacities in navigating transition to adulthood trajectories, structural factors still play a decisive role in this respect^{15,17,39}. One of the most significant structurally-driven pattern of variability in the transition process is associated with the length of school trajectories. From this choice (or structural determination), two differentiated transition universes are created^{9,18}. Fast trackers, with an early entry attempt into the labor market face nowadays, in Portugal, enormous difficulties in this endeavor, being the group that displays higher unemployment rates and lower wages. Slow trackers, investing in longer school trajectories (involving higher education studies) intimately associated with the family’s cultural and financial support, by developing a crucial identity capital tangible resource (University credentials) tend to benefit from a widening of transition options and opportunities that accentuate the non-linearity, de-standardization and individualization of their transition trajectories^{16,20,54}. Yet, the great majority of slow trackers is far from facing a smooth transition process: The prolongation of academic projects does not necessarily lead to a short-term attainment of steady jobs, which subsequently leads to the postponement of the formation of one’s own family^{41,50}. However, this crucial difference between these two transition universes exerts a powerful influence in the timing and conditions of other subsequent transitions such as the establishment of an independent living or the formation of one’s own family. Despite the possibility of a non-linear relationship between academic level and preparedness for the

assumption of adult roles and responsibilities^{25,28}, it is assumed that the holders of higher education credentials still tend to perceive themselves as better positioned to compete for the most coveted professional occupations^{25,28,57} and present higher levels of tangible identity capital that will enable them to more favorably negotiate the transition in a very competitive and sometimes even hostile socioeconomic climate, particularly in the professional domain. Since the criteria for having attained the adult condition, in contemporary Western societies, is essentially derived from a sense of autonomy and self-reliance (strongly associated with the achievement of stable financial independence), the socially and economically less favored youths may be facing huge hurdles in their way to develop and consolidate a consistent sense of adult identity. Yet, in this respect, empirical studies have, so far, focused mainly on youths that have taken on university studies - a section of the population that has been given the opportunity to delay the acquisition of financial autonomy, and thus the assumption of adult roles and responsibilities. In order to pay attention to the “forgotten half” (those who do not pursue university studies), this study aims at capturing possible differences between these two groups of youths.

Self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles and expectations of success as intangible identity capital resources

The sense of agency that lies behind the concept of intangible identity capital is understood as the possession of a sense of responsibility for one’s life course, a sense of control of one’s life decisions and responsibility for their outcomes, coupled with the feeling of confidence that one will be able to overcome the difficulties and successfully face the challenges inherent to the path of transition to adulthood^{21,30,48,52,61-62,65,67}. The empirical operationalization of this sense of agency has been implemented throughout the last two decades by the use of a composite measure that integrates specific measures of self-esteem, purpose in life, ego strength, and internal locus of control^{24,64,65}.

In the present study, we aimed at testing different agentic variables that have not yet been operationalized in the context of identity capital theory, namely, *self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles, expectations of success and exploration of adult roles and worldviews*.

Self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles. The importance of self-efficacy beliefs as an agentic asset derives from the fact that they may determine the level of motivation and persistence of individuals in confronting the challenges and

obstacles they may encounter in the path toward adulthood. According to the theory of self-efficacy^{5-8,38,56}, the way people perceive and interpret life events, especially the results of their actions, have powerful effects on their personal beliefs, which will, in turn, have a determinant role in their subsequent behavior. So, the person's beliefs in their own capabilities to exercise control over future events may take a leading role in the process of adapting to the socioeconomic conditions of late modernity or even of changing the life contexts. The interest in the use of self-efficacy as a measure of agentic capacity in the period of transition to adulthood stems from two main reasons: on the one hand, self-efficacy may be one of the most important agentic assets for navigating into adulthood in a socioeconomic context characterized by high levels of individualization and uncertainty^{7,35,42-43}; on the other hand, given the fact that self-efficacy was originally conceived as a context-specific variable, it permits to measure the individual's agentic capacities in relation to domain-specific experiences associated with diverse adult roles and responsibilities⁵⁻⁸. According to the latter consideration, the use of self-efficacy as a measure of agency permits a microanalysis of the congruency between self-efficacy perceptions and specific action domains⁸.

Expectations of success. Expectations of success may also play a significant role as an intangible identity capital component. These expectations broadly refer to beliefs concerning how one will perform and what one will achieve in certain life domains^{33-34,40,42,69}. The confidence that one will achieve certain results that are significant to the acquisition of an adult status could be a significant predictor of adult identity resolution³⁵. It may help us to better explain the adult identity resolution process: in a socioeconomic environment that promotes a lengthy and hazardous transition process, the anticipation of success in tasks associated with adult roles and responsibilities may be a powerful inducer of personal readiness for their assumption.

Both self-efficacy beliefs for the performance of adult roles and associated expectations of success will be used as indicators of the anticipation of the performance of adult roles and assumption of adult responsibilities. We assume that, in the presence of numerous obstacles emerging adults face in the process of constructing and consolidating their adult identity (e.g., difficulties in making a smooth transition to the labor market that would allow the acquisition of stable financial independence, the postponement of the formation of one's own family to an unforeseeable future when financial stability is attained), the

perception of having attained and resolved an adult identity may be derived from the belief in one's own capability to perform the tasks inherent to those adult roles and the confidence that these roles will be successfully performed. The sense of preparedness and confidence in the ability to perform the latter may be enough to create the perception of being an adult. This hypothesis is in line with the more subjective and individualistic criteria emerging adults call upon to define themselves as adults: the acceptance of responsibility for their own actions, deciding on their own beliefs and values, establishing an equal relationship with their parents and becoming financially independent^{1,3}.

Despite the importance of self-efficacy beliefs and expectations of success concerning the performance of adult roles, there have been no studies aimed at empirically demonstrating their predictive power as potent motivational factors in the construction of a viable adult identity in nowadays uncertain and insecure socioeconomic environment. It is therefore important to observe whether or not these variables focused on the anticipation of adult roles and responsibilities are good predictors of adult identity resolution during emerging adulthood.

Exploration of adult roles and worldviews. Given the obstacles that contemporary Western societies present to a smooth transition to adulthood, the exploratory period needed for the preparation to assume adult roles and responsibilities and identity consolidation has been continuously extending. This is one of the most important factors that may be at the root of the emergence of *emerging adulthood* as a new life phase presenting characteristics that differentiate it from adolescence and young adulthood. The main features of this emerging life period consist in the profuse exploration and experimentation of biographical options and opportunities pertinent to further, future commitments to certain adult roles and to the assumption of adult responsibilities. According to emerging adulthood theory, the maintenance of high levels of exploration and experimentation are a sign of not having yet achieved the adult status – of feeling in between adolescence and young adulthood, which is the characteristic experience of being an emerging adult. Hence, a negative association will be expected between exploration of adult roles and adult identity resolution.

Empirical studies

Study 1: assessing differences in identity exploration, identity capital (as measured by the levels of self-efficacy for the performance of adult

roles and expectations of success) and adult identity resolution according to educational level of emerging adults

One of the pivotal transitions in the process of reaching adulthood is the transition from school-to-work⁴¹. In Western industrialized societies, the labor market has considerably changed³⁰, with job positions continually becoming obsolete and others being born. The growing pace of technological changes, in the competitive context of a global economy, has introduced unprecedented levels of volatility within the labor market: the need for rapid and constant adaptation to the markets' conditions and demands, on behalf of economic corporations and businesses, has led them to require growing levels of flexibility from their labor force⁵¹⁻⁵². As a consequence, job contracts have tended to become increasingly precarious, short-term and riddled with uncertainty. These heightened levels of uncertainty and unpredictability in the work sphere especially affect youths who are attempting their school-to-work transition and more broadly their transition to adulthood trajectories. Yet, not all youths are expected to be equally affected by this volatility. In a labor market where higher levels of training and expertise are required in order to gain access to personally meaningful and viable professional occupations, emerging adults that go through higher education are expected to be better prepared to compete for the most coveted work positions. Despite the possibility of a non-linear relationship between academic level and the attainment of better work occupations^{25,28}, research has shown that obtaining a college degree has long been a predictor of higher income and job status. Accordingly, in the present study, we expect that the holders of higher education credentials will perceive themselves as better positioned to compete for the most coveted occupations by evidencing higher levels of self-efficacy in the professional domain as well as a higher overall level of expectations of success. However, a longer school journey may also involve the postponement of the assumption of adult roles and responsibilities (both professional and familial) and the consequent maintenance of a dependence or semi-dependence status on the family of origin, which may lower their level of identity resolution. Conversely, youths with lower educational levels are expected to cease their identity exploration activities earlier and more rapidly seek to actualize their adult roles both in the professional and in the family sphere. This group of youths, usually from families with fewer resources, and thus with a diminished capacity to assist them (financially and socially) in the transition endeavor, has no escape but to face the most

volatile, precarious and uncertain transition conditions. On the one hand, they face the challenges of the transition process armed with a weaker familial support system. On the other, they lack a tangible identity capital resource, namely higher education credentials, that could enable them to more favorably negotiate their entrance into the labor market. These two factors, in articulation, can render the transition paths of the *forgotten half* more uncertain, less linear and riddled with insurmountable obstacles from which a sense of vulnerability and uncontrollability over the course of one's biographical path may emerge. Yet, as they tend to make an earlier transition (when compared to their counterpart that pursues college education) to the labor market that may grant them at least a living wage, they may conquer faster an embryonic sense of autonomy and financial independence that is indispensable for the perception of being an adult. Based on this premise we expect emerging adults that do not pursue higher education and thus make an early entry into the labor market to present higher levels of adult identity resolution.

According to the above considerations, the following hypotheses are formulated:

Hypothesis A: Considering that, according to identity capital theory, educational level is an important tangible asset favouring integration into adult roles, and considering the dynamic relationship between tangible and intangible identity capital, it is hypothesized that the higher the academic level (tangible identity capital), the higher the levels of self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles and the expectations of success (intangible identity capital), in personal and vocational life spheres.

Hypothesis B: However, individuals with lower educational levels who tend to invest early in adult roles and responsibilities, making an early transition to adulthood, will have higher adult identity resolution indexes.

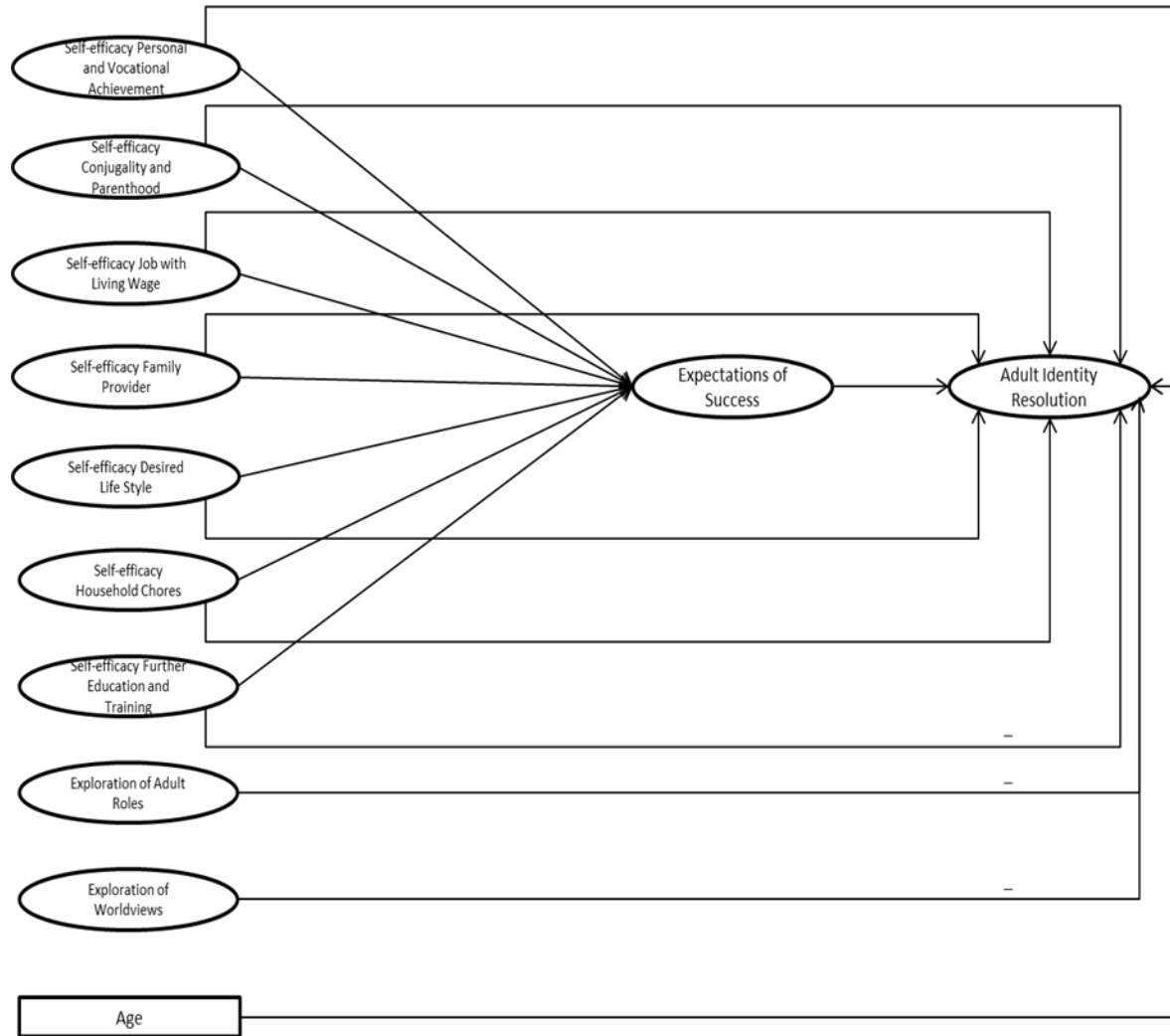
Study 2: predicting adult identity resolution from identity exploration, self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles and expectations of success. Exploring differences according to the emerging adults' educational level.

Self-efficacy beliefs for the performance of adult roles as well as associated expectations of success may be strong motivational factors for the achievement of goals associated with adult identity resolution. They may, thus, have a strong predictive power over adult identity resolution. According to identity capital theory, emerging adults with high levels of both self-efficacy and expectations of

success have prepared themselves for the tasks of adulthood. Conversely, and according to emerging adulthood theory, high levels of exploratory activity can be an indicator that the youths are still in the process of constructing their own psychosocial

identity and seeking a way to integrate themselves in a community of adults. Hence, a negative association between exploratory activity and adult identity resolution will be expected. The hypothesized model is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hypothesized path model.



Note: the minus sign indicates an expected negative association between the variables. All other associations are expected to be positive.

Despite these expected general associations, we also hypothesize that the process of identity construction may vary according to different transition paths, associated with different educational trajectories. As stated earlier, an emerging adult that has the resources and opts for attending higher education delays the timing of the school-to-work transition and increases his/her identity capital assets (academic credentials), thus securing a better position from which to negotiate the entrance into the labor market, and subsequently to negotiate further transitions. Such a

transition route may give youths a heightened sense of control over the unraveling and the timings of the transition process. Conversely, youths that do not pursue higher education will tend to negotiate an earlier transition to the labor market from a position of higher vulnerability derived from the possession of fewer identity capital assets. Furthermore, the articulation of specific transitions youths are to navigate in the path to adulthood (e.g., entering the labor market, leaving the parental home, formation of own family) may be strongly influenced by the adoption of one or the other of these broad

transition trajectories. Thus, we hypothesize that the specific types and timings of transitions, as well as their specific modes of articulation based on the length of educational trajectories may influence the types of intangible identity capital assets that will have an influence on adult identity consolidation. Put in other words, we hypothesize that different transition trajectories may require different psychological resources or a different articulation of these same resources.

Age, as a socio-demographic variable that subsumes a wide range of psychosocial developmental gains is also expected to be a strong positive predictor of adult identity resolution in both groups of emerging adults. Yet, as it represents a traditional marker of the transition to adulthood, we expect that its predictive power will be stronger for emerging adults whose academic credentials do not go beyond the secondary school level.

According to the above considerations, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

Hypothesis C: For both groups of emerging adults, self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles as well as high levels of expectations of success concerning the attainment of goals associated to adult life will be predictors of adult identity resolution, either directly or indirectly through expectations of success;

Hypothesis D: For individuals with higher educational levels, given their superior investment in academic and vocational goals, self-efficacy for the achievement of personal and professional goals, self-efficacy for the pursuit of the desirable life-style, and self-efficacy for the pursuit of further education and training will be the strongest predictors of their adult identity resolution, either directly or indirectly through the mediation of expectations of success;

Hypothesis E: In turn, for individuals with lower educational levels, self-efficacy for the attainment and performance of a job from which to obtain at least a living wage, self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood, self-efficacy as a family provider, and self-efficacy for the performance of household chores, either directly and indirectly through the mediation of expectations of success will constitute the main predictors of adult identity resolution.

Hypothesis F: Age, as a socio-demographic variable will influence identity resolution, though more strongly for the group of less educated emerging adults;

Hypothesis G: For both groups of emerging adults, identity exploration will be a negative predictor of adult identity resolution.

Method

Participants

Criteria for inclusion in the study were the following: aged between 18 and 30 years; both male and female; with Portuguese nationality; either at school, University, in any training scheme, already employed, unemployed and searching for a work position; living with their parents, already having own housing arrangements or in any other kind of housing arrangement; married or single or in a non-marital partnership; of any sexual orientation; with an educational level of up to 12 years of school or above (University studies) and independently of the field of studies; from all socioeconomic levels. Excluded from the study were youths underage (below 18 years of age) or above 30 years of age, and non-Portuguese nationals.

The participants consist of 346 subjects aged between 18 and 30 years, of both genders and grouped in two educational levels (up to 12 years of schooling and above 12 years of schooling). The sample is distributed as follows: 138 men (39,9%), 208 women (60,1%); 163 individuals aged between 18 and 21 years (47,1%) and 183 individuals aged between 22 and 30 years (52,9%); 180 individuals with up to 12 years of schooling (52,2%) and 165 individuals with more than 12 years of schooling (47,8%).

Variables

The dependent variable is identity stage resolution and the independent variables are self-efficacy towards adult roles, expectations of success, and active exploration of adult roles and worldviews.

Measures

A questionnaire was created in order to gather socio-demographic data as well as data regarding self-efficacy towards adult roles, expectations of success, worldviews and adult roles exploration, and identity stage resolution.

Socio-demographic variables. The socio-demographic questionnaire gathered data on age, gender, level of education, occupation, civil status, parents' level of education, parents' occupation.

Self-efficacy towards adult roles scale, designed by Coimbra and Fontaine²². The scale is composed of 43 items (e.g., "to have children", "to have a stable job", "to buy a house") covering several domains of adult roles and responsibilities. The scale structure explains 59.7% of the variance and is composed of 7 reliable dimensions: Self-efficacy for personal and vocational achievement ($\alpha = ,89$), self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood ($\alpha = ,86$), self-efficacy as a family

provider ($\alpha = ,89$), self-efficacy for attainment and performance of a job that provides at least a living wage ($\alpha = ,68$), self-efficacy for the pursuit of the desired life-style ($\alpha = ,77$), self-efficacy for the performance of household chores ($\alpha = ,80$) and self-efficacy for the pursuit of further education and training ($\alpha = ,83$).

Expectations of success scale. This scale was also created for the purposes of the present study and measures the youths' expectations of success in six life domains: work, family, finances, relationships, leisure, quality of life in general. Participants were asked about the opportunities and capacities they believed they had in order to accomplish their goals in the afore-mentioned life domains. The scale is one-dimensional and explains 61,45% of the variance ($\alpha = ,87$).

Worldviews and adult roles exploration scale. The scale was designed for the present study and is composed of 5 items (e.g., "to explore other ways of seeing things before adopting the one I feel most identified with", "to experiment other jobs before I commit myself to one that is more stable"). The scale structure explains 68,24% of the variance and is composed of 2 dimensions: active exploration of adult roles ($\alpha = ,76$) and exploration of worldviews ($\alpha = ,73$).

Identity stage resolution index (ISRI). The scale, designed by Côté²⁴, was adapted to the Portuguese population and is composed of two subscales: the *Adult Identity Resolution Scale (AIRS)* and the *Community Identity Resolution Scale (CIRS)*. AIRS structure explains 34,06% of the variance and has an internal consistency of $\alpha = ,84$. CIRS structure explains 26,06% of the variance and has an internal consistency of $\alpha = ,67$. The two subscales load on a second order factor (the Identity Stage Resolution Index - ISRI).

Procedure

The study complied with the European Union's and the University of Porto's ethics regulations^{i,ii} and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Porto in Portugal.

Participants were recruited with the help of educational and training institutions (for those still in school/ University and training schemes) and through diverse ways of public advertisement and invitation to participate in the study (publicizing through social networks, sending email invitations). A snowball procedure was also used, as incoming participants, whenever possible, were requested to support the study by inviting people they knew who fitted the inclusion criteria to participate.

Paper and pencil and online ways of responding the questionnaire were used. In both cases, respondents were handed/ presented with an information sheet about the study and an informed consent form they had to fill in and sign before answering the questionnaire. Participation was strictly voluntary and confidential, and participants could withdraw from the study at any moment during the process of filling in the questionnaire.

Gathered data were analyzed with the use of the following statistical software: IBM SPSS®, version 25, and IBM SPSS AMOS®, version 22.

Results

Study 1: Differences according to educational level

According to educational level, differences were found for the following variables: identity stage resolution index and community identity resolution (Table 1). Participants with an educational level of up to the 12th grade scored higher in these two variables.

Table 1. Differences according to educational level.

Dependent variables	Up to 12 years of schooling		More than 12 years of schooling		F	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD			
Community identity resolution	2,42	0,73	2,20	0,71	7,78	1	0,006
Identity stage resolution index	2,38	0,66	2,21	0,60	6,83	1	0,009

ⁱ [ethics-for-researchers_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://ethics-for-researchers_en.pdf(europa.eu))

ⁱⁱ [U.Porto - Visualização de Documentos \(up.pt\)](https://www.up.pt/visualizacao-de-documentos)

Study 2: Predicting Identity Stage Resolution

A path model was created to test the following: (1) the predictive power of self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles over adult identity resolution; (2) the possible mediating role of expectations of success in that relationship; (3) the predictive power of age, as a variable that may integrate an array of developmental gains, over adult identity resolution. First order latent variables were created to represent the various specific measures of self-efficacy (Self-efficacy for personal and vocational achievement, self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood, self-efficacy as a family provider, self-efficacy for attainment and performance of a survival job, self-efficacy for the pursuit of the desired life-style, self-efficacy for the performance of household chores, and self-efficacy for the pursuit of further education and training), expectations of success and the adult identity resolution index. The use of latent variables in structural equation modeling permits the control for measurement errors as well as the analysis of relationships between overall "true" scores, given the fact that each latent variable can be taken to represent the construct the various indicators (items) are measuring^{45,46}. Given the fact that each latent variable is constructed from the aggregation of multiple indicators, it reflects and represents the variability that is shared among those indicators. Thus, the variability of each indicator, individually considered, is removed from the model.

The aim of the study was to capture possible differences according to educational level (comparing the group of emerging adults that pursue higher education with the group that does not go beyond secondary school). The first and basic requirement for testing cross-group configural equivalence (and subsequently measurement and structural equivalence) consists in the existence of the same number of factors with the same loading pattern across groups¹⁹. In the present study, this basic requirement was not met since differences were found concerning some of the factors predicting adult identity resolution across the two groups of emerging adults. These basic differences between the two baseline models that were built for each group precluded the possibility of invariance

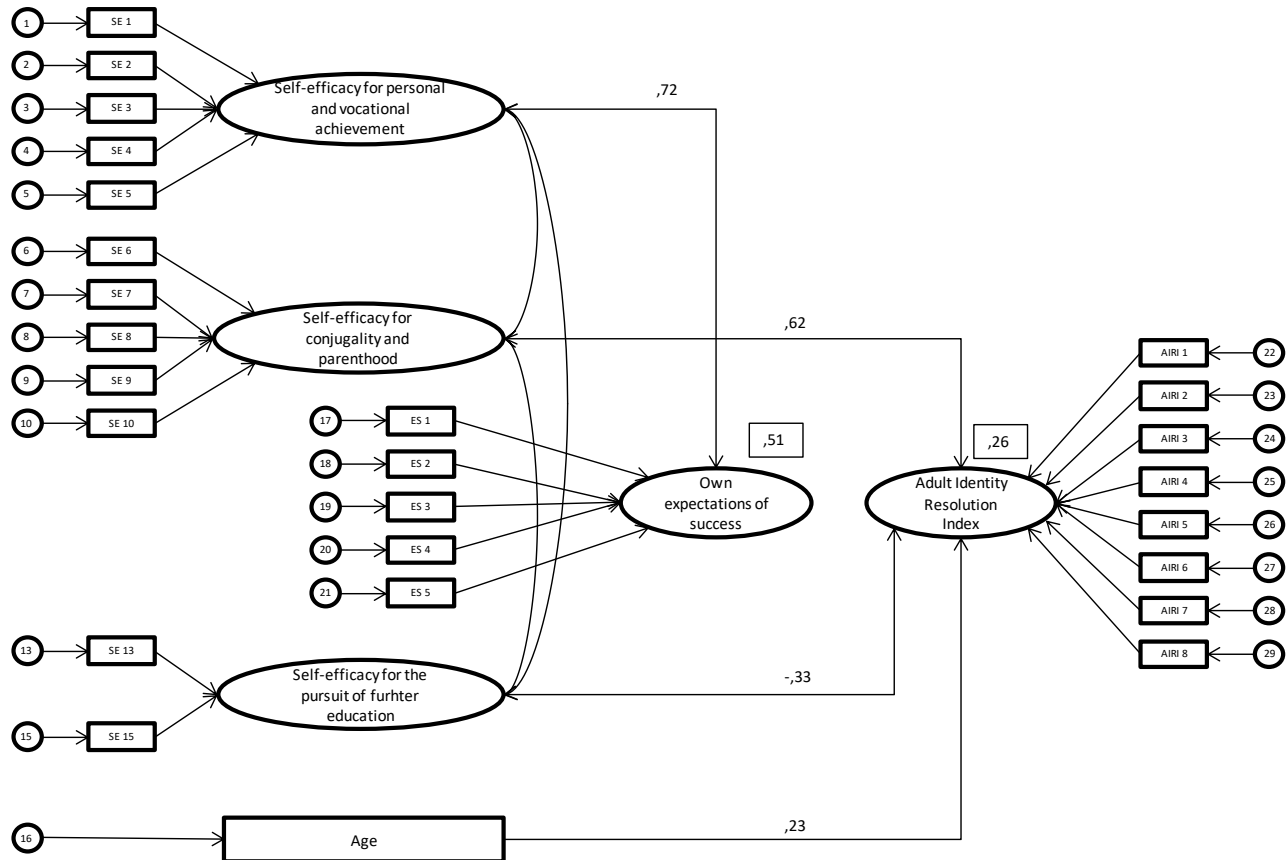
testing. Hence, the procedure of constructing two baseline path models, one for each group of emerging adults¹⁹ was followed. In the process of construction of both path models, the independent variables that were not significant predictors of the adult identity resolution index (the dependent variable) were eliminated. The validity of each baseline model was then tested separately for each group¹⁹.

Two structural models (one for each group of emerging adults) are then presented. The fit of these two models to the data was evaluated attending to standard structural equation modeling indices: the chi-square statistic, aimed at comparing the variance-covariance matrix subjacent to the model with the variance-covariance matrix observed in the data; the comparative fit index (CFI), comparing the specified model to a null model with no paths or latent variables; the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) which compares the variance-covariance matrix subjacent to the model with the variance-covariance matrix observed in the data, adjusted for sample size and model complexity. A good fit implies a non-significant chi-square value, a CFI of .90 or above, an RMSEA of .80 or below, and a standardized mean square residual (SRMR) value of .60 or below⁴⁶.

Good fit indices were achieved for the two models constructed. Fit indices for the model for the group of emerging adults with an educational level of up to secondary education are the following: $\chi^2/df = 2.44$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06. For the group of emerging adults with high education the model fit indexes are the following: $\chi^2/df = 2.27$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .058.

According to the path analysis model for the group of emerging adults with higher education, the attainment of identity resolution can be positively and directly predicted from self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood, and age. Self-efficacy for the pursuit of further education and training constitutes a negative, direct predictor of the adult identity resolution index. (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Model of transition paths to adulthood for emerging adults that pursue higher education.

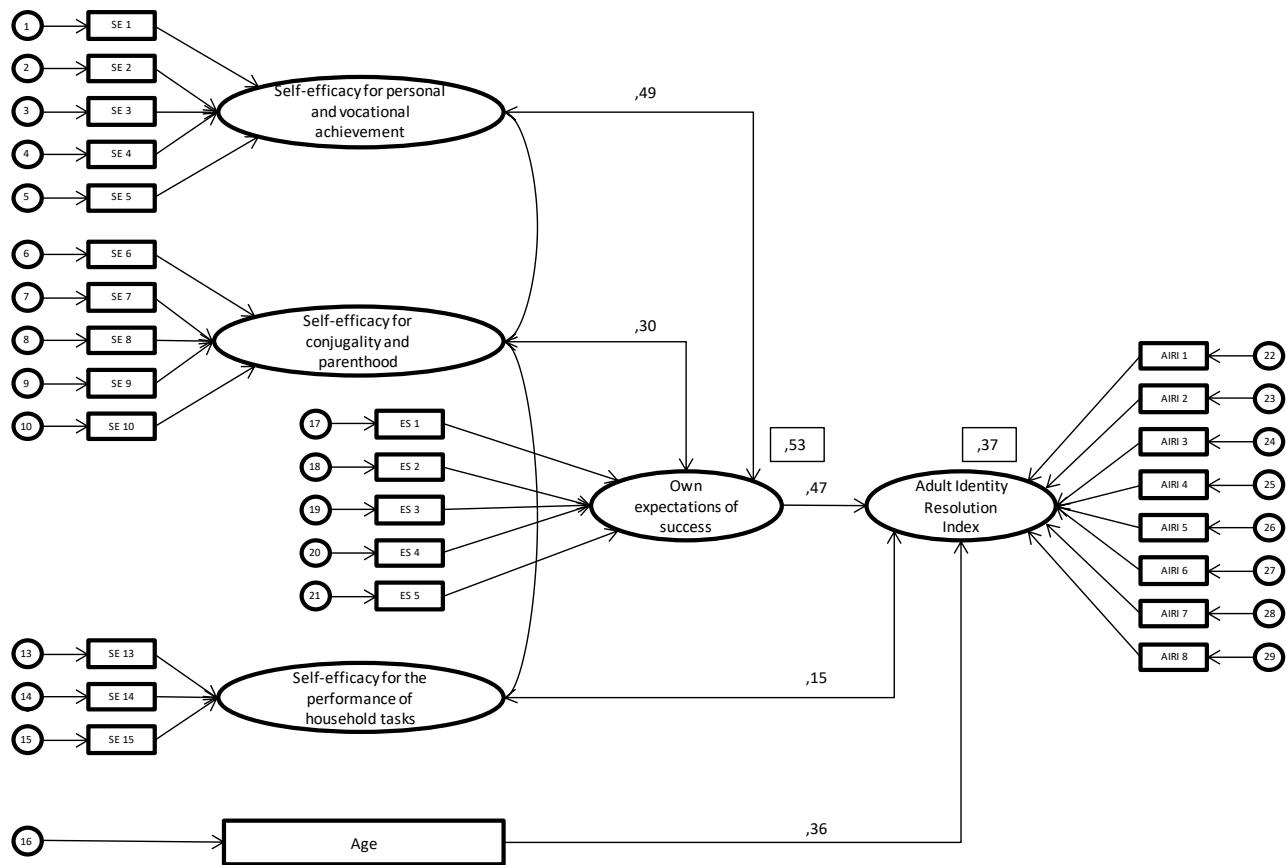


Model fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.27$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .06. SRMR = .058.

As for the group of emerging adults that do not pursue higher education studies, their adult identity resolution index is directly predicted from self-efficacy for the performance of household chores and age. Additionally, the adult identity

resolution index is predicted indirectly by self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood, and self-efficacy for personal and vocational achievement through the mediation of expectations of success (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Model of transition paths to adulthood for emerging adults that do not pursue higher education.



Model fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.44$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06

Discussion

The goal of the first study was to observe possible differences in identity exploration, intangible identity capital possession (measured by the levels of self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles and expectations of success) and identity resolution between those emerging adults who pursue higher education and those who do not (the *forgotten half*). The reason and rationale behind the goal of this study is associated with the fact that the different type and timing of school-to-work transition between these two groups of emerging adults may have an impact on the type and amount of identity capital resources they need to navigate two structurally different transition paths. As the results have shown, emerging adults with lower academic qualifications presented higher rates of *community identity resolution* and overall identity resolution (as measured by the *adult identity resolution index*). This may be explained by the fact that these individuals start taking on adult roles and responsibilities at an earlier age or, at least, they engage in an earlier negotiation of these roles and responsibilities due to their earlier leaving the

educational system. Yet, it is noteworthy that no differences were found when it comes to the individual perception of having attained adult status, as measured by the *Adult Identity Resolution Scale* (AIRS). The early transition to the job market of this group of emerging adults is usually marked by high levels of instability. The working positions at their disposal may be scarce and, when available, they usually involve short-term contracts with the payment of low wages. Consequently, these youths end up facing long periods of unemployment intercalated by precarious jobs that hardly allow them the establishment of a financially independent way of life^{41,54,55}. Facing such challenging school-to-work transition conditions may induce a lingering sense of not possessing the conditions and resources associated with an individual sense of having reached adult status. It should be underlined though that both groups present low levels in community identity resolution and adult identity resolution indices, which is an indication that all youths seem to take longer to affirm a sense of independence and self-reliance inherent to the achievement of the adult condition.

Despite the expected transition to adulthood difficulties emerging adults that do not pursue higher education may face, they evidenced similar levels of self-efficacy for the performance of adult roles and expectations of success in an array of diverse life domains (work, family, finances, relationships, leisure, overall quality of life) when compared to their peers that pursue longer educational paths. This result may be associated with a "large fish in a small pond" phenomenon⁴⁹. Accordingly, individuals with lower academic qualifications may live in a less demanding and less competitive social environment consisting of peers of the same academic level (or even lower) facing the same problems. Thus, they may tend to determine their life goals according to the mean group achievement, making an equally positive and optimistic assessment of their chances of achieving those goals. Conversely, individuals with higher educational levels may perceive themselves as living in a "pond" with bigger "fishes", in a more challenging and competitive environment. This lowers their own self-concept of competence and, therefore, their beliefs in their self-efficacy to achieve more demanding goals, and consequently their expectations of success. This phenomenon may level the expectations of success for both groups as each may tend to construct their expectations of success according to group-specific achievement goals.

The goal of the second study was to capture the impact of the anticipation of adult roles and responsibilities through self-efficacy beliefs and expectations of success, as well as the active exploration of adult roles and worldviews on adult identity resolution. Age, as a variable in which developmental gains tend to be reflected, was also taken into account and tested as a predictor of identity resolution. Differences were indeed found between these two groups of emerging adults that resulted in the construction of two path models (one for each group) that reveal some similarities between them as well as some specificities. We will start by analyzing what is similar in both models.

As can be observed, age directly influences identity resolution in both groups of emerging adults. As expected, identity resolution, as a developmental variable, increases with age. Age as a complex experiential template that aggregates a wide range of developmental experiences and the accumulation of psychosocial resources seems to be perceived as directly and in its own right affecting the perception of having attained the adult condition. Yet, as hypothesized, its predictive power is greater for the group of less educated emerging adults, probably evidencing the more

traditionally normative nature of this group's transition trajectory.

A second similarity consists in the fact that, in both models, *self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood* has a strong predictive power over adult identity resolution. However, if in the group with higher education credentials we observe a direct relationship between *self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood* and identity resolution, in the group with lower educational credentials, this relationship is totally mediated by the emerging adult's expectations of success. In our view, this outcome may be better analyzed and interpreted if associated with specific identity resolution predictive paths that are evidenced in the models presented.

The first specificity is related to the role of *self-efficacy for personal and vocational achievement* and expectations of success as adult identity resolution predictors. As can be observed *self-efficacy for personal and vocational achievement* directly influences expectations of success in both models. Yet, expectations of success serve as an identity resolution predictor solely for the group of emerging adults with lower educational credentials. Thus, *self-efficacy for personal and vocational achievement* constitutes an identity resolution predictor only within this group of emerging adults. Taking these latter evidences together, one can say that, for the group of less educated emerging adults, self-efficacy beliefs for both spheres of conjugality/ parenthood and personal/ vocational achievement account for the rise of expectations of success which, on their turn, will have a strong predictive impact on adult identity resolution. Concerning this group of emerging adults, one can observe a joint and parallel contribution of self-efficacy in these two life spheres on identity resolution through the mediation of expectations of success. On the contrary, for the group of more highly educated emerging adults, there seems to be a split between these two life spheres when it comes to their relation to identity resolution. For this latter group only *self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood* has an impact on identity resolution, which is not mediated by expectations of success. On the one hand, one can interpret this evidence as a sign that, for youths that go through higher education, their expectations of success are essentially tied to their educational and vocational/ professional goals. On the other hand, it seems that the postponement of the actualization of their professional goals (delayed gratification associated with their vocational investments), which results from their extended educational paths, leads them to dissociate their preparedness for the achievement of personal and professional goals

from identity resolution. Given the present difficulties these more educated youths also face in finding a work position that matches their high expectations and criteria for success, which may only come later on in their biographical paths, they may be forced to dissociate the timing of actualization of their expectations from the timing of adult identity resolution. Given the unpredictability and volatility that may be associated with their vocational and professional life paths, the appeal to the preparedness for the assumption of family responsibilities appears to denote a higher consistency of this traditional marker of transition to adulthood in delineating the line between emerging and full adulthood. This phenomenon may arise from the sense of responsibility and irreversibility associated with family relationships that presume the establishment of enduring commitments to other people (a spouse and possibly children).

Two last differences could be observed between the models constructed for the two groups of emerging adults. On the one hand, and looking at the model for the less educated emerging adults, one observes that one last predictor of adult identity resolution consists in *self-efficacy for the performance of household chores*. Once again, and analyzing this result in conjugation with the role of *self-efficacy for conjugality and parenthood* and *self-efficacy for personal and vocational achievement*, in predicting adult identity resolution, one can interpret it as further evidence that this group of emerging adults tends to derive their sense of having achieved the adult condition from an overall simultaneous perception of preparedness for the assumption of adult roles and responsibilities in the work and family life spheres. Conversely, their peers who navigate the transition to adulthood through an extended educational path (comprising the attainment of higher education credentials) seem to negatively associate their sense of competence for study activities (measured by their levels of *self-efficacy for pursuing further education and training*) with their identity resolution. For this latter group, the prolonged educational path seems to delay the acquisition of the adult status. Being a student tends to be linked to a status of financial dependency from the family of origin since the youth is yet to make his/ her transition to the labor market and gain a position of financial independence.

One last aspect that deserves consideration is the lack of association between the emerging adult's exploratory activity and adult identity resolution. According to the theory of emerging adulthood, the exploration of adult roles and worldviews is the most prominent characteristic of

this life phase¹. Moreover, the perception of adult identity resolution seems delayed by a relatively strong exploratory activity within the process of identity construction. The maintenance of exploratory activities was, then, expected to be an indicator of the emerging adult status, of not yet having taken the step to commit themselves to specific adult roles and responsibilities. Accordingly, it would be expected that the engagement in exploratory activities would be a negative predictor of identity resolution. Yet, as can be observed, the results of the present study do not corroborate these premises, as no relationship was found between exploration of adult roles and worldviews and adult identity resolution. Given the fact that the transition must be negotiated in a context of uncertainty and unpredictability, and the adult condition is assuming an increasingly open nature (more attuned with a sense of *becoming* associated with self-realization), the maintenance of a certain level of exploration may be indispensable to the process of continuous adaptation to an ever-changing socioeconomic environment.

Conclusion

According to emerging adulthood theory¹, in the last two decades Western industrialized societies have witnessed the erosion of the traditional markers of transition to adulthood. These markers have been replaced by more subjective criteria associated with a sense of empowerment, independence and responsibility for own actions. This phenomenon seems closely associated with the individualization process characteristic of late modern societies^{10-12,32}.

Taking into account the increased individualization of the process of transition to adulthood, one would be led to conclude that coming of age is now decoupled from any socio-structural factors and regularities. Yet, as Furlong and Cartmell³⁹ had already observed, the influence of certain structural regularities like the ones associated with the level of education can be observed from the results of the present study. May one then, from such evidence, postulate the structural regularity of the process of transition to adulthood? What is observed is a dynamic relationship between structural factors and agentic capacities²⁷: on the one hand, the anticipation of adult roles and responsibilities (through self-efficacy beliefs and expectations of success) seems to have the power to influence adult identity resolution; however, on the other hand, the type and amount of identity capital accumulated, relevant to the acquisition of the sense of adult maturity, is influenced by structural factors such as educational paths. These educational paths tend to influence the

definition of goals, roles as well as the resources available to achieve them and the respective achievement timings. In accordance, the types of identity capital capable of influencing the process of adult identity resolution as well as their specific interrelations may vary according to educational paths. In this sense, emerging adulthood may not present itself as a uniform transition period comprised of normative patterns or regularities that affect in the same way different groups of emerging adults.

Lastly, we draw attention to some of the limitations of the present study. Some of the instruments used, particularly the *personal expectations of success scale* and the *worldviews and adult roles exploration scale*, aimed to capture the underlying psychological dimensions in a rather broad or ample fashion. This fact may have hindered the possibility of more detailed analysis of differences in the analyzed variables according to the level of education of emerging adults. Thus, more detailed measures would be welcomed in

order to further explore those possible differences. Namely, it would be relevant to address expectations of success in connection with the achievement goals held by these two groups of emerging adults in order to contextualize the former and better interpret between-group differences. In addition to these methodological considerations, and taking into account the complexity of the process of transition to adulthood, one should bear in mind that other variables also play an important role in this process. As coming of age is a contextual process, ecological systems are of particular relevance in influencing the route of ascent to the condition of full adulthood¹⁵. Such is the case of the specific family system involvement¹⁶, particularly in a Mediterranean model of transition⁶⁰. Therefore, though the results of the present study provide a contribution to the study of the transition to adulthood, they need to be interpreted in the context of other studies that address this subject from other perspectives and use other relevant variables.

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