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PARENTING STYLES, GENDER-ROLE ORIENTATIONS AND ROMANTIC BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCE IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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Abstract

The paper traces out a problem that is not well-analysed in the psychological literature, namely, the relationship between parenting styles, gender-role orientations and romantic beliefs and experience in emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental stage that differs from adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2004). In order to capture these major characteristics of emerging adulthood in the Bulgarian context, in the period September – November 2015, students aged 18–29 (M = 22.86, SD = 3.86) from University of Library Studies and Information Technologies – ULSIT, Sofia, were surveyed in groups during seminars (N = 255). All respondents studied to obtain a Bachelor's degree in various professional fields. The results of the empirical research have shown that the authoritative parenting style is the most preferred among young people. Preference for feminine gender-role orientation is observed. Romantic beliefs and experience are also essential for the formation of psychosocial identity in the years of emerging adulthood.

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Keywords: Parenting styles, gender-role orientations, romantic beliefs and experience, emerging adulthood.

1. Introduction

In modern western societies and cultures adolescence begins earlier, while adulthood (linked with romantic partnership, marriage, and parenting) comes much later than in previous generations (Arnett, 2000, 2004). For most young people the years from the end of adolescence to the end of the twenties are a time of both excitement and uncertainty, open opportunities and confusion, new freedoms and new fears (Arnett, 2004). That is why this period is notable as a unique and important stage in development, different than adolescence and early adulthood.

Arnett (2004) postulates that emerging adulthood is a period during which young people explore opportunities in romance and love. Emerging adults are eager to find out what kind of person they would like to get married to and to acquire romantic experience before choosing the one to partner with permanently. According to Arnett, emerging adults can have many different romantic relationships, and these relationships are often unstable and short-termed. From that point of view romantic relationships during emerging adulthood are largely associated with exploration and experimentation and should have little impact on later marital behavior.

The formation and maintenance of a romantic relationship is a priority psychosocial development task of emerging adults. Romantic relationships have important implications for the subjective well-being and psychological adaptation of the individual. Gender-role orientations and behavior linked with romantic experience can also predict attitudes and behavior in marriage in the form of parenting styles (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Axinn & Barber, 1997). Therefore, it is important to analyse both the romantic relationships during emerging adulthood and the determinants and consequences of these romantic ties. Not surprisingly, the purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between perceived parenting styles, gender-role orientations and romantic experience and beliefs in emerging adulthood among the 18–29-year olds.

Emerging adults are still a poorly studied age group in Bulgaria. A few empirical studies focusing specifically on the 18–29 age group verify the existence of heterogeneity at this age, confirm the existence of certain dimensions of emerging adulthood and highlight the typological specificities and life tasks typical of emerging adults in the context of contemporary Bulgarian culture (Pencheva & Papazova, 2009; Papazova, Moody, & Bathurst, 2015; Garvanova & Papazova, 2017). Consequently, there is a need for new empirical data on the issues related to the years of emerging adulthood.

1.1. Parenting styles and emerging adulthood

Parenting styles are described as a complex of parental behavioral responses that create an atmosphere of parent-child interactions in different situations (Mize & Pettit, 1997). On the basis of the work of Baumrind (1978, 1995) and some researchers who continue her research (e.g. Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Roberts, 1986), several large typologies of parenting styles have been identified, such as *authoritative*, *authoritarian*, and *permissive*. These parenting styles are differentiated in terms of two dimensions: warmth and control.

Authoritative parents tend to display both high control and high responsiveness and warmth to their children. Expectations are clear, rules are explicit and rational and discipline is administered in a

consistent manner. Baumrind (1978) explains that authoritative parents openly discuss any problems or actions that may arise concerning the child and show firm control when necessary.

Authoritarian parents combine high control with lower warmth levels. This parenting style allows for strong parental control over the child, leaving minimal involvement of children in decision-making (Baumrind, 1991). Moreover, in this form of one-way communication the child is not allowed to express views or opinions (Baumrind, 1978).

Permissive parents show high levels of warmth and low control. As the warmth is shown through overindulgence, they tend not to be demanding and to avoid controlling behavior in framing the child environment (Baumrind & Black, 1967). They require little from children, especially in the areas of maturity and responsibility (Baumrind, 1991).

Some studies reveal that self-assessment of emerging adults and their self-actualization is positively correlated with the authoritative parenting style. The authoritative style adhered to and practiced by parents is associated with the development of autonomy in emerging adults (Dominguez & Carton, 1997).

A Bulgarian study of 180 students in emerging adulthood has found that the authoritative parenting style is most used in the studied sample, with precise and clear rules laid down, combined with flexibility and warmth. Next to it is the permissive parenting style consisting in taking responsibility for the child's needs and avoiding restrictions or requirements. Mothers use the authoritarian style to impose high requirements and controls to a lesser degree (Rasheva, 2013).

1.2. Gender-role orientations and emerging adulthood

The term "gender" expresses practices associated with femininity, masculinity and androgyny in social relationships. Gender-role orientations are learned through the process of socialization when children gain understanding of what kind of personal traits are related to masculinity (masculine traits) and what kind are associated with femininity (feminine traits) (Bem, 1979). Next they develop their self-concept in two dimensions (Palan, 2001).

Masculinity and femininity are independent dimensions of the self-concept and co-exist within the individual. People differ in the extent to which they are defined as masculine, feminine, or androgynous, although men do not necessarily have masculine self-concepts, and women – feminine ones (Bem, 1981). Both women and men can have both feminine and masculine self-concepts, that is, to be androgynous (Chang, 2006). Emerging adulthood as a life cycle period characterized by testing multiple independent social roles implies experimenting with all three types of gender-role orientations at this age (Arnett, 2004).

1.3. Romantic beliefs and experience and emerging adulthood

Creating and maintaining a successful romantic relationship is a challenge, but on the whole finding a trustworthy partner or any partner at all may possibly lead to problems and difficulties (Clark & Beck, 2010; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2003). Even when a desirable partner is found, the relationship may worsen over time and love and happiness may vanish (Maner & Miller, 2010). These questions cause anxiety among young adults because they have little experience in maintaining a successful long-term

relationship (Arnett, 2000; Clark & Beck, 2010; Maner & Miller, 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2010).

Romantic love is conceptualized as affection, caring, and sexual attraction and it is crucial for the development of intimate relationships (Fitness, Fletcher, & Overall, 2005). The partners may perceive their relationship as good or bad and the explanations they give may influence their emotions, motivation, and behavior (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000; Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Fincham, 2003).

When emerging adults enter into a romantic relationship, they need to have some idea of whether their partner is the person they want to spend their lives with and eventually build a family with. Therefore, romantic relationships start becoming more prominent and distinct during that period (Meeus, Branje, Van der Valk, & De Wied, 2007). Research shows that emerging adults who have had at least one long-term relationship are more likely to have achieved identity or identity moratorium and less likely to experience identity diffusion in reconciling work and family life (Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011).

1.4. Relationship between parenting styles, gender-role orientations, and romantic beliefs and experience

A survey of 230 students aged 18–23 was designed to establish the relationship between parenting styles and gender roles. The results indicate that the authoritarian style correlates positively with androgyny in both sexes in the years of emerging adulthood (Lin & Billingham, 2014).

No research is found in the literature that explicitly establish a link between romantic expectations and beliefs, parenting styles, and gender roles in the period of emerging adulthood. Indirectly, gender-role orientations and romantic-related behavior can predict attitudes and behavior in marriage in the form of parenting styles (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Axinn & Barber, 1997).

2. Problem Statement

The current study seeks to outline some of the major characteristics of emerging adulthood such as parenting styles, gender-role orientations and romantic beliefs and experience among Bulgarian students.

3. Research Questions

The leading *hypotheses* are based on the assumption that there are: 1) age-related terms of parenting styles, gender roles, and romantic beliefs and experience, and 2) a relationship between them in emerging adulthood (Lin & Billingham, 2014).

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to present the characteristics of the parenting styles, the gender-role orientations, and the romantic beliefs and experience in the years of emerging adulthood in the Bulgarian socio-cultural environment with the following tasks: 1. To develop a profile of young people regarding these constructs, and 2. To trace the correlation between them.

5. Research Methods

5.1 *Parenting Style Questionnaire – PSQ* (Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995). It consists of three scales: 13 items for the authoritarian style, 13 items for the authoritative one and 4 items for the permissive one. The respondents are asked to assess the extent to which they would engage in parenting practices as perceived by them. The rating scale is a 6-point one: from 1 – "never" to 6 "always". The highest score of the three scales defines the preferred parenting style. The Cronbach's alpha is as follows: for the whole questionnaire – 0.76, authoritative parenting style – 0.83, authoritarian parenting style – 0.80, and permissive parenting style – 0.52.

5.2. *Bem Sex-Role Inventory – BSRI* (Bem, 1979). This questionnaire consists of 60 items, 20 items for masculinity, 20 items for femininity, and 20 items for gender neutrality. The rating scale is 7-point: from 1 – "never or almost never true" to 7 – "almost always true". Its Cronbach's alpha is as follows: for the whole methodology – 0.87, scale for masculinity – 0.83, scale for femininity – 0.80, and neutral scale – 0.60.

5.3. *Romantic Beliefs Scale – RBS* **(**Sprecher & Metts, 1989). The questionnaire consists of 15 items. The respondents are asked to share their personal opinion on love and romance in any of the statements. The rating scale is 7-point: from 1 – "strongly disagree" to 7 – "strongly agree". The Cronbach's alpha is 0.83.

5.4. *Relational Experience Scale – RES* (Costigan, 2006). The respondents must first answer the question of whether they are currently in a romantic relationship. If they have romantic experience, they are requested to assess how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with their relationship with this person according to a 7-point scale, where 1 is "completely dissatisfied" and 7 – "completely satisfied" (M = 5.65, SD = 1.23).

The sample consists of 255 students in the 18–29 age group (M = 22.86, SD = 3.86), 166 of them (65.1%) men and 89 (34.9%) women. 141 (55.3%) of them are single, 41 (16.1%) are married, 10 (3.9%) are divorced and 63 (24.7%) cohabit with a partner. Those who have children are 66 (25.9%) and those without children are 189 (74.1%). Students were surveyed in groups during seminars in the period September – November 2015. All respondents studied at the *University of Library Studies and Information Technologies – ULSIT*, Sofia to obtain a Bachelor's degree in such major professional fields as *Public Communications and Information Sciences* and *Informatics and Computer Science*.

6. Findings

6.1. Parenting styles

The descriptive statistics of the parenting styles are presented in Table 1.

Table 01. Parenting styles (descriptive statistics)

Parenting styles	Number of items	M	SD	Min	Max	α
Authoritative	13	5.11	0.63	1.69	6.00	0.83
Authoritarian	13	2.70	0.78	1.00	5.08	0.80
Permissive	4	2.68	0.77	1.00	5.00	0.52

As can be seen from Table 1, the most preferred parenting style of the students in emerging adulthood in Bulgaria is the authoritative one, followed by the authoritarian and permissive ones. The result of this study very likely reveals that emerging adults tend to exercise both high control and demonstrate high responsiveness and warmth to their children. Their expectations are clear, the rules are categorical and rational, and discipline related to the education of children is applied in a consistent manner.

6.2. Gender-role orientations

The 255 students in emerging adulthood surveyed fall into the following gender scheme: 92 (36.1%) are *undifferentiated* (less pronounced masculine and feminine traits), 65 (25.2%) are *feminine* (strongly pronounced feminine, but less pronounced masculine traits), 51 (20%) are *masculine* (strongly pronounced masculine, but less pronounced feminine traits), and 47 (18.4%) are *androgyny* (strongly pronounced both masculine and feminine traits). Most likely the highest percentage of undifferentiated individuals in relation to gender identity can be explained by the characteristics of emerging adulthood, according to Arnett, a psychosocial moratorium and delaying decision-making on important vital issues over time (Arnett, 2004). The descriptive statistics in Table 2 are summarized in the three scales of the BSRI (Bem, 1979).

Table 02. Gender-role orientations (descriptive statistics)

Gender-role orientations	Number of items	M	SD	Min	Max	α
Masculinity	20	4.65	0.74	2.70	6.90	0.83
Femininity	20	4.77	0.68	2.85	6.20	0.80
Neutrality	20	4.40	0.46	2.50	5.80	0.60

As can be seen from Table 2, emerging adults in Bulgaria prefer the feminine in the highest degree, followed by masculine and neutral gender-role orientations. Probably this finding is determined by the moderate femininity, according to Hofstede's theoretical model, typical for the Bulgarian culture (Hofstede, 2001).

6.3. Romantic beliefs and experience

The descriptive statistics on the RBS of Sprecher and Metts (1989) are shown in Table 3.

Table 03. Romantic beliefs (descriptive statistics)

Variable	Number of items	M	SD	Min	Max	α
Romantic beliefs	15	71.08	13.99	17	104	0.83

The high average of 71.08 in the RBS reveals that creating a romantic partnership is one of the key tasks of development in emerging adulthood, making it a sensitive area in the process of interpersonal communication. Those of the emerging adults who are currently in a romantic relationship and have accumulated a romantic experience are moderately satisfied with their romantic partnership (M = 5.65, SD = 1.23), according to the RES (Costigan, 2006).

6.4. Relationship between parenting styles, gender-role orientations, and romantic beliefs and experience

Table 4 traces the relationship between the studied variables: parenting styles, gender-role orientations, and romantic beliefs and experience.

Table 04. Correlation matrix

Variables	Romantic beliefs	Romantic experience
Authoritative style	0.23**	0.25**
Authoritarian style	0.03	-0.03
Permissive style	0.02	0.05
Masculinity	0.16**	0.13
Femininity	0.28**	0.17*
Neutrality	0.23**	0.01

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$

Romantic beliefs slightly correlate with the authoritative parenting style with the three gender-role orientations – masculinity, femininity, and neutrality. In turn, the romantic experience of emerging adults poorly interacts with the authoritative parenting style and femininity (Table 4). Not accidentally, some studies suggest that the authoritative parenting style in emerging adulthood correlates positively with self-esteem and self-actualization as well as with the development of autonomy in young people (Dominguez & Carton, 1997). These features can also be attributed to the existence of romantic beliefs and experience, which undoubtedly brings self-confidence at this age and correlates with the three types of gender-role orientations. In essence, that determines the aspiration toward autonomy in the preferences for gender roles and gender identity.

7. Conclusion

One of the important psychosocial development tasks in emerging adulthood (18–29 years) is to seek and experiment with romantic partnership. The present study focuses precisely on the romantic beliefs and experience among Bulgarian emerging adults. We have tried to make a profile of Bulgarian youth in three dimensions: gender-role orientations, adopted parenting style and romantic beliefs and experience. These research efforts appeared due to the absence of relevant studies in the period of emerging adulthood in Bulgaria. It was also interesting to trace the relationship between the three constructs in this age group. In summary, the results show that:

7.1. The most preferred parenting style of the students in emerging adulthood is the authoritative one. Emerging adults tend to show both high control and high responsiveness and warmth for their children. The presence of romantic experience brings moderate satisfaction.

7.2. Emerging adults prefer the feminine gender-role orientation in the highest degree, which is most likely due to the specifics of the Bulgarian culture.

7.3. Romantic beliefs are less associated with the authoritative parenting style with all three gender-role orientations. In turn, romantic experience weakly correlates with authoritative parenting style and femininity. These correlations can be explained with the preference for autonomy and positive self-esteem in emerging adulthood and are within the bounds of the assumptions made.

The findings generally confirm the assumption of a specific, age-bound relationship between the three measured constructs – parenting styles, gender-role orientations, romantic beliefs and experience to be analysed in relation to other psychological traits in future research studies.

Acknowledgments

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