Comparison of Adulthood Criteria Endorsed by Emerging Adults and their Parents in Greece: A Mixed-Method Study

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report no potential conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Abstract

Although there is extensive research on the adulthood criteria endorsed by emerging adults, there is very limited evidence on the comparison between emerging adults and their parents regarding this issue. Moreover, in these comparison studies only quantitative methodology was used. Therefore, the present study uses a mixed-method design to investigate similarities and differences in the prevalence of the endorsed adulthood criteria between emerging adults and their parents, between male and female emerging adults, and between fathers and mothers. Participants were 251 emerging adult students, aged 18.0 to 25.9 (M = 19.9; 50.2% females) and 341 parents of these emerging adults, aged 33.6 to 61.9 (M = 50.4; 58.4% mothers). They completed the Markers of Adulthood Scale and named the three criteria that they considered most important for a person to be considered an adult. An inductive-deductive coding scheme was used. The analyses exhibited a high consensus between emerging adults and their parents in the endorsement of adulthood criteria. Only criteria related to Independence and to the Self were reported more frequently by emerging adults than their parents. A strong agreement between genders in both age groups was also found. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it supports the idea that in Greece adulthood is a construct that is largely shared by emerging adults and their parents. Second, it illustrates how a mixed-method design can complement quantitative studies and extend their findings.

Keywords: adulthood criteria, emerging adults, parents, mixed-method study, Greece

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Introduction

What does it take to be an adult? Starting with Arnett's (2000) idea that researchers should not rely only on adulthood criteria or markers as defined within various scientific fields (e.g., age, leaving parental home, marriage, employment) but also ask the persons themselves to rate the importance or the achievement of several adulthood criteria, extensive research has addressed this topic. A large part of this research has focused on the adulthood criteria endorsed by emerging adults (for an overview, see Nelson & Luster, 2015). Very limited research, conducted in the USA (Nelson et al., 2007), China (Nelson et al., 2013) and Greece (Vleioras, 2021), has compared the criteria that emerging adults and their parents have for adulthood as well as gender differences. Mixed results have emerged from these studies regarding the degree of similarity and discrepancy in the endorsement of criteria, the specific criteria in which similarity and discrepancy occurred, and the gender differences (i.e., male vs female emerging adults, fathers vs mothers), with culture playing an important role in this issue. For example, high agreement occurred for the essential adulthood marker of relational maturity, whereas norm compliance was more important for parents than for emerging adults; fathers rated norm compliance as more important than mothers, whereas mothers rated family capacities as more important than fathers (Nelson et al., 2007). In China (Nelson et al., 2013) there seems to be more discrepancy between emerging adults and their parents compared to the USA (Nelson et al., 2007) and Greece (Vleioras, 2021).

This comparison is important because negotiations on the meaning of adulthood hold a central position in the intergenerational communication and sheds light on parents' role in the adulthood experience of their children (Nelson & Luster, 2015). There are several reasons to expect both similarities and differences in such a comparison. On the one hand, similarities between emerging adults and their parents may reflect historically and culturally defined ideas about the meaning of adulthood (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Moreover, emerging adults often negotiate their adulthood status with their parents, and this negotiation may lead either to similarities, because the same adulthood aspects are discussed by both age groups, or to differences in the conceptions of adulthood, because different adulthood aspects are more salient for each age group at a specific time point (Nelson et al., 2007; Nelson & Luster, 2015). On the other hand, differences between cohorts regarding views of adulthood may reflect societal changes towards different values (Nelson et al., 2013). Another reason accounting for discrepancies is that parents have achieved important adulthood criteria, such as being independent, getting married, and having children (Arnett, 2001), and this possibly has led them to a view of adulthood different from that of their children (Vleioras & Mantziou, 2018).

The Present Study

In the limited research that has compared the adulthood criteria of emerging adults and their parents, some version of the Markers of Adulthood questionnaire (MoA), introduced by Arnett (1994), has been used. The MoA consists of a list of possible adulthood criteria, arranged in subscales. Notwithstanding its usefulness, it has been argued that including each criterion in one subscale only and not letting individuals offer their own narrative accounts of criteria may obscure the richness and complexity of their conceptions of adulthood (Andrew et al., 2006; Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007).

In addition, the predefined items of this list may underrepresent the adulthood experiences of less well-researched populations (Katsiaficas, 2017; Katsiaficas et al., 2015).

These limitations can be addressed with the use of a mixed-method design, in which answers to a qualitative measure are coded, quantified, and used to test for statistically significant differences. Such a design was used by Katsiaficas (2017) for the investigation of subjective markers of adulthood and was adopted in the present study to examine whether there are differences in the prevalence of the endorsed adulthood criteria (a) between emerging adults and their parents, (b) between male and female emerging adults, and (c) between fathers and mothers.

Based on the reasoning presented earlier and on previous research (Nelson et al., 2007, 2013; Vleioras, 2021), we expected to find both similarities and differences in the prevalence of the endorsed criteria between emerging adults and their parents. In addition, based on existing research indicating that emerging adulthood as a construct is defined and experienced differently by men and women (e.g., Sharon, 2016) and on theoretical models supporting the differences in ethics between men and women (e.g., Gilligan, 1982), we expected to find some gender differences in the prevalence of the endorsed criteria in both age groups.

Regarding emerging adulthood in Greece, research indicates that Greek emerging adults have a heightened feeling of being in-between adolescence and adulthood and tend to define adulthood in both individualistic and collectivistic terms (Galanaki & Leontopoulou, 2017; Galanaki & Sideridis, 2019). In addition to the strong family ties that typically characterize the Greek context, the 2008 Global Recession, which lasted longer and had more adverse effects in Greece compared to other countries, has increased the reliance of young people on their parents for

housing and support and may account for the finding that Greek young people consider financial independence as a key marker of adulthood (Galanaki & Sideridis, 2019). Thus, the high agreement found between emerging adults and their parents on the ranking of the importance of adulthood criteria (Vleioras, 2021) can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that prolonged co-residence creates time and space for intergenerational transmission of norms and values. It should also be noted that the present study was conducted during the lockdown period (spring 2021) that was necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, young people had to stay at home with their parents and experienced increased financial adversity and dependency on parents, as well as limited opportunities for undertaking adult roles.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 251 emerging adult students (50.2% females) aged 18.0 to 25.9 (M = 19.9; SD = 1.6) and 341 parents of these emerging adults (58.4% mothers) aged 33.6 to 61.9 (M = 50.4; SD = 5.2) from several regions of Greece. For more sociodemographic information on the participants, see Table 1 (Supplementary Material).

Student research assistants at the Department of Primary Education of the University of Thessaly recruited emerging adult students and at least one of their parents, via non-probability convenience sampling aimed to maximize sociodemographic representativeness (Galloway, 2005), and provided them with a link to an online form. The first page of the form contained information on the study (e.g., aim, possible benefits and hassles, rights of the participants, anonymity, confidentiality) and an informed consent request. The study was exempt from institutional review.

Measure

Participants provided sociodemographic information (i.e., age, gender, family status, educational level, nationality, and language spoken at home) and then completed the Greek version of the MoA (Galanaki & Sideridis, 2019), in which they were asked on a 4-point Likert-type scale to rate the importance of 43 criteria for defining adulthood. In addition, they were asked to name the three criteria that they considered most important for a person to be considered an adult (as in Zhong & Arnett, 2014). In the present study, we report the results regarding this question.

Coding of Answers

We used an inductive-deductive structured thematic analysis to code the adulthood criteria present in the responses of emerging adults and parents combined (Robinson, 2022). First, we set all criteria in tentative groups, according to the main idea(s) denoted in the answer. We set answers containing more than one main idea to more than one group. Then, we combined these groups considering the number of codes included and their relevance to existing literature on adulthood criteria. We based our codes on the ones used by Katsiaficas (2017), because we considered that these codes were well-defined, were based on the existing literature on emerging adulthood and covered most of the criteria that emerged in the present study.

Following Robinson (2022), after the first author had completed the coding, a research assistant coded a randomly selected set of answers from 25 participants. Where divergence appeared, the two raters worked together to refine the coding scheme and achieve a consensus. Such a collaborative iterative coding process ensured the trustworthiness and rigor of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). The degree of agreement, calculated as the number of agreements divided by the sum of the number of agreements and the number of disagreements (Miles & Huberman, 1994),

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increased from 67.7% to 98.8%, and the one point of disagreement was coded as Unable to be coded. The final coding scheme consisted of the following themes: Independence, Responsibility, Maturity, Skills, Others, Self, Life transitions, Age, Financial aspects, Desired characteristics, Other, and Unable to be coded. The first nine themes were based on Katsiaficas (2017), the tenth was specific to this study, the eleventh contained codes that did not fit any other theme, and the twelfth theme contained non-sensical answers. For a detailed overview of this scheme, see Table 2 (Supplementary Material).

Data Analysis

We coded each theme for each participant with 0 if the theme did not appear and with 1 if the theme appeared at least once in this participant's answers (Robinson, 2022). Then, we calculated the themes' frequencies per participants' group, that is, emerging adults vs. parents, male vs. female emerging adults, and fathers vs. mothers. The frequencies are reported in Table 3 (Supplementary Material). We then conducted 2 x 2 Chi-square tests with theme/no theme crossed with age group, emerging adults' gender, and parents' gender. Finally, we calculated the rank-order correlation coefficients (Spearman rho) between the ranking of the prevalence of the criteria in each pair of groups (in line with Vleioras, 2021). In the analyses concerning gender differences, we included only those participants who identified themselves as males or females. The cut-off for significance was set at $p < .01$. Statistical analyses were conducted with JASP (Version 0.16.3; JASP Team, 2022).

Results

Comparison between Emerging Adults and their Parents

The three most prevalent criteria for both emerging adults and their parents were Independence, Responsibility, and Maturity. The fourth most prevalent criterion was

Self for emerging adults and Skills for parents. The only statistically significant difference between emerging adults and their parents emerged for Independence and Self. These two themes were more prevalent among emerging adults than among parents, $\chi^2(df = 1) = 6.76$, $p = .009$, $\varphi = .28$ and $\chi^2(df = 1) = 8.52$, $p = .004$, $\varphi = .35$, respectively. The rank-order correlation coefficient was .90, p < .001.

Comparison between Male and Female Emerging Adults

The two most prevalent criteria for both male and female emerging adults were Independence and Responsibility. The third and fourth most prevalent criteria were Maturity, Skills, and Self (the last two, equally endorsed) for males, and Self and Skills for females. There were no statistically significant gender differences in the prevalence of the adulthood criteria. The rank-order correlation coefficient was .97, p < .001.

Comparison between Fathers and Mothers

The two most prevalent criteria for both fathers and mothers were Independence and Responsibility. The third and fourth most prevalent criteria were Desired characteristics and Major life transitions for fathers, and Maturity and Skills for mothers. There were no statistically significant differences between fathers and mothers in the prevalence of the adulthood criteria. The rank-order correlation coefficient was .88, p < .001.

Discussion

The present study used a mixed-method design to compare the adulthood criteria espoused by emerging adults and their parents. The findings indicated a high degree of consensus between emerging adults and their parents regarding the criteria that are considered important for adult status. High endorsement and high consensus regarding adulthood criteria were evident for what constitutes the core of adulthood,

that is, independence, responsibility, and maturity. A similar finding was reported by Nelson et al. (2007) for US emerging adults regarding relational maturity, although the consensus in Greece seems to be higher than that in the US. This finding is also in accordance with existing data indicating that adulthood in Greece is perceived as the achievement of a hybrid of individualistic and collectivistic values (Galanaki & Sideridis, 2019). Thus, this finding supports the conceptualization of adulthood as a historically and culturally defined construct (Arnett, 2001) that it is subject to intergenerational transmission (Nelson & Luster, 2015) and is largely shared by emerging adults and their parents.

However, there were some differences between emerging adults and their parents regarding the conceptions of adulthood criteria. Specifically, emerging adults espoused criteria related to Independence and to the Self more frequently than their parents. It seems that independence is a more salient issue for emerging adults as it reflects their current developmental task of achieving autonomous functioning (Arnett, 2001). Moreover, independence may be especially important in a cultural context, such as Greece, where strong family ties and financial adversity increase dependency on parents and the in-between feeling (Galanaki & Sideridis, 2019). In addition, emerging adults are typically more self-focused, whereas their middle-aged parents are likely to be more other-focused (Arnett & Mitra, 2020; Reifman & Niehuis, 2023), and this difference may also affect the lens through which they view adulthood. The fact that there were no gender differences for emerging adults and their parents provides additional support to a broadly accepted and shared view of coming of age in the Greek context.

The present study has some limitations. Certain population categories (e.g., non-students, non-binary) were not adequately represented in the sample. Providing

responses to open questions after having rated the 43 criteria of the MoA may have affected these responses in unpredictable ways. These issues could be addressed by using larger and more representative samples, and by asking the open question only. Future research could use this mixed-method design in various cultural contexts to investigate whether these findings are specific to the Greek culture or not. In addition, possible micro-processes that account for similarities and differences between emerging adults and their parents (such as parent-child discussions on what adulthood is) should be investigated (Nelson & Luster, 2015).

Conclusion

This small-scale study contributed to the existing literature on the conceptions of adulthood in two ways. On a theoretical level, it has supported the idea that adulthood is a construct historically and culturally defined, thus, largely shared by emerging adults and their parents of both genders. On a methodological level, it exhibited how a mixed-method design can complement quantitative studies and extend their findings. Future research could profit from mixed-method designs to further elucidate the conceptions of adulthood.

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Supplementary Material

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Emerging Adults and Their Parents

Sociodemographic characteristics	Emerging Adults ($N = 251$)		Parents ($N = 341$)	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*
Gender				
Male	122	48.6	138	40.5
Female	126	50.2	199	58.4
Non-binary	1	0.4		
Prefer not to say	2	0.8	3	0.9
Missing			1	0.3
Family status				
Married	1	0.4	296	86.8
Single	250	99.6	2	0.6
Divorced			40	11.7
Widow			2	0.6
Missing			1	0.3
Educational level				
Primary			13	3.8
Secondary	251	100.0	105	30.8
Post-secondary			81	23.8
Higher			112	32.8
Graduate			28	8.2
Missing			2	0.6
Nationality				
Greek	247	98.41	330	96.77
Double (incl. Greek)	2	0.80	6	1.76
Other	1	0.40		
Missing	1	0.40	5	1.47
Language spoken at home				
Greek	246	98.01	336	98.53
Greek and other	1	0.40	3	0.88
Other	2	0.80	1	0.29
Missing	2	0.80	1	0.29

Table 2

Themes, Rules for Assigning, and Example Answers for the Adulthood Criteria of Emerging Adults and Their Parents Combined

Theme	Includes answers focusing on:
Independence	Being independent: *Deciding autonomously, Independence* Being financially independent: *Financially independent, Capable of supporting oneself alone by means of their salary* Having own opinions or decisions: *Having their own opinions about things, Choosing their own beliefs*
Responsibility	Being responsible: *Responsible, Feeling ready to take the responsibilities of their actions* Taking initiatives: *Making important decisions, Initiative*
Maturity	Maturity or development: *Maturity, Emotional development*
Skills	Way of thinking: *Thinking reasonably, Having a sense of danger* Practical skills: *Able to take care of their family, Thinking before acting*
Others	Relating with and treating others: *Equivalent relationship with parents, Having developed lifelong relationships with others* Sexual or love relationships: *Women, Active sex life*
Self	Self-knowledge: *Conscious of feelings and values, Knowing the self* Self-care: *Having the responsibility of oneself, Able to protect oneself* Self-management: *Self-control, Self-discipline*
Life transitions	New roles in life: *Living alone, Marriage*
Age	Specific ages or legal transitions that are bound to specific ages: *Being 18 or older, Age limits, Being 20*
Financial aspects	Finances (but not with reference to being financially independent): *Salary, Financial condition*
Desired characteristics	Characteristics viewed as positive, such as answers focusing on: - Character, Cultivation: *Composed personality, Stability of character* - Specific wished characteristics: *Patience, Laborious* - Experience, Knowledge: *Experiences, Experience in socializing* - Avoiding illegal or dangerous behaviors: *Not using illegal drugs, Not engaging in illegal actions*
Other	Themes that did not fit any of the previous codes, such as answers related to: - Ownership: *Owning a car, Having acquired something by means of working* - Driving license: *Having a driving license* - Freedom, Rights: *Freedom, Having more rights*
Unable to be coded	Includes answers that could not be coded: *Intense sexual desires*

Table 3

Frequencies of Themes per Age Group and Gender

Theme	Emerging adults			Parents		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
	(*n*=122)	(*n*=126)	(*N*=251)	(*n*=138)	(*n*=199)	(*N*=341)
	f (%)	*f* (%)	*f* (%)	*f* (%)	*f* (%)	*f* (%)
Independence	**76 (62.3)**	**78 (61.9)**	**154 (62.1)**	**68 (49.3)**	**105 (52.8)**	**175 (51.3)**
Responsibility	**55 (45.1)**	**62 (49.2)**	**118 (47.6)**	**61 (44.2)**	**109 (54.8)**	**171 (50.1)**
Maturity	**39 (32.0)**	33 (26.2)	**74 (29.8)**	34 (24.6)	**63 (31.7)**	**97 (28.4)**
Skills	**33 (27.0)**	**37 (29.4)**	71 (28.6)	34 (24.6)	**54 (27.1)**	**90 (26.4)**
Others	28 (23.0)	26 (20.6)	55 (22.2)	33 (23.9)	48 (24.1)	82 (24.0)
Self	**33 (27.0)**	**38 (30.2)**	**72 (29.0)**	27 (19.6)	36 (18.1)	64 (18.8)
Life transitions	21 (17.2)	24 (19.0)	46 (18.6)	**38 (27.5)**	48 (24.1)	87 (25.5)
Desired characteristics	22 (18.0)	22 (17.5)	44 (17.7)	**40 (29.0)**	46 (23.1)	87 (25.5)
Age	12 (9.8)	15 (11.9)	28 (11.3)	13 (9.4)	18 (9.0)	31 (9.1)
Financial aspects	10 (8.2)	7 (5.6)	17 (6.9)	14 (10.1)	13 (6.5)	28 (8.2)
Other	4 (3.3)	4 (3.2)	8 (3.2)	5 (3.6)	3 (1.5)	9 (2.6)
Unable to code	5 (4.1)	6 (4.8)	11 (4.4)	0 (0.0)	4 (2.0)	4 (1.2)

Note. The four most frequently mentioned themes per column are presented in bold. The total number of participants per age group is more than the sum of male and female participants, because some participants did not report their gender or reported a non-binary gender.