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PREDICTORS OF WELL-BEING IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD: ROLE OF GOALS AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD TRANSITION DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

Although there has been increasing research on well-being in emerging adulthood (EA), only little attention has been paid to its connection with goal pursuit in this life period. Young adults in EA are generally expected to pursue goals which reflect the main developmental tasks in this life period, e.g. to graduate, find a job, leave parents' house, get married, have children. However, emerging adults do not necessarily incorporate and transform all those external expectations into their personal goals which they are committed to attain. To fill the gap in the research knowledge in goal pursuit and well-being in EA, the main aim of this study was to explore the role of EA transition dimensions and goals of emerging adults in explaining the variance in well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect) in EA. This study is a part of a broader longitudinal research project on goal-oriented behavior in EA. Currently, the second phase of the data collection is in process. Therefore, the data coming from the first phase of the research were analyzed for the purposes of this paper. A total number of 647 emerging adults aged 18-30 (M = 23.28, SD = 3.39) participated (78% female; voluntary response sampling). In Qualtrics questionnaire, they indicated if they had goals in the four areas (education, work, relationships, and personal growth; 0 = I do not have a goal in this area; 1 = I have a goal in this area) and briefly described their goals. After that, they completed a short form of the Inventory of the dimensions of emerging adulthood (IDEA-8), Satisfaction with life scale, and Emotional habitual subjective well-being scales. The regression analyses (Enter method) revealed that well-being was significantly predicted by two EA transition dimensions (experimentation – positive predictor; negativity/instability – negative predictor). The current presence of goals in the four areas did not significantly explain a variance in well-being in EA. However, t-tests revealed that emerging adults with goals in the areas of education and relationships reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and/or more frequent positive affect compared to their peers without goals in the two areas. The findings can be applied into psychological practice to prevent decrease in well-being and to support mental health of emerging adults.

Keywords: *Well-being, life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, emerging adulthood, current goals.*

1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood (EA; 18-29 years; Arnett, 2015) is a life period characterized by identity exploration, experimentation, negativity/instability, and feeling in-between. From the perspective of goal pursuit, young adults in EA are generally expected to focus on goals which reflect the developmental tasks in this life period, e.g. to graduate, find a job, leave parents' house, get married, or have children. However, emerging adults do not necessarily incorporate and transform all those external expectations into their personal goals which they are committed to attain. As a result, the level, in which goals associated with an adult role are accomplished, can be related to well-being of emerging adults. Surprisingly, although there has been increasing research on well-being in EA (Baggio, Studer, Iglesias, Daeppen, & Gmel, 2017; Hill, Jackson, Roberts, Lapsley, & Brandenberger, 2011; Sharon, 2016), only little attention has been paid to its connections with goal pursuit and EA transition dimensions. In a study by Baggio et al. (2017), well-being was found to be positively associated with experimentation, while negatively with identity exploration and negativity/instability. Sharon (2016) provided evidence that well-being in EA was associated with the level of fit between perceived importance of markers of adulthood and the self-rated level of their attainment. However, research evidence for the associations between goal pursuit, EA transition dimensions, and well-being is still insufficient. To fill this gap in the research knowledge, the main aim of the current study was to explore the role of the four EA transition dimensions and goals of emerging adults in four life areas

(education, work, relationships, and personal growth) in explaining the variance in well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect) in EA.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In this study, 647 emerging adults participated (78% were female; age ranged between 18 and 30 years; M = 23.28, SD = 3.39). The majority of the research sample were single – in a relationship (46%) and students (37%). A purposive sampling method was used to select the research sample. The participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous.

2.2. Instruments and procedure

The participants completed online survey in Qualtrics. First, they were asked to give their consent to participation in the research study, and to answer socio-demographic questions (gender, age, marital status, and employment status). Next, they indicated if they had goals in four life areas (education, work, relationships, and personal growth; 0 = I do not have a goal in this area; 1 = I have a goal in this area) and briefly described their goals. After that, they completed a short form of the Inventory of the dimensions of emerging adulthood (IDEA-8; Baggio, Iglesias, Studer, & Gmel, 2015), Satisfaction with life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and Emotional habitual subjective well-being scales (Džuka & Dalbert, 2002) to measure the frequency of the positive and negative affect.

This study is a part of a Slovak longitudinal research project on goal-oriented behavior in EA. Currently, the second phase of the data collection is in process. In the current study, the data coming from the first phase of the research (November 2021 – March 2022) were analyzed.

2.3. Statistical analyses

The data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and Jamovi 2.3.21. Multiple regression analyses (Enter method) were used to identify the significant predictors of life satisfaction (Model 1), positive affect (Model 2), and negative affect (Model 3) in EA. A total number of 10 predictors were analyzed in the three models (Step 1: age and gender; 0 = male, 1 = female; Step 2: four EA transition dimensions; Step 3: presence of goals in four life areas: education, work, relationships, and personal growth; 0 = I do not have a goal in this area; 1 = I have a goal in this area).

According to a sample size calculator (Soper, 2022), a minimum of 160 participants was required to observe a medium effect size (0.15) at the statistical power level of 0.8, and at probability level of 0.01 in the multiple regression model with 10 predictors. Therefore, the number of participants was sufficient for the analyses. With regard to the number of 10 predictors in regression models, the results were interpreted as significant at probability level of 0.005 (Bonferroni correction).

3. Results

The greatest amount of variance in life satisfaction (ΔR^2 = .185, p <.001), positive affect (ΔR^2 = .239, p <.001), and negative affect (ΔR^2 = .272, p <.001) was explained by the four EA transition dimensions. More specifically, well-being was best predicted by experimentation and negativity/instability (Table 1). Negativity/instability was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction (β = -.338, p <.001), positive affect (β = -.378, p <.001), and negative affect (β = .475, p <.001). Experimentation was the second strongest predictor of life satisfaction (β = .284, p <.001), positive affect (β = .329, p <.001), and negative affect (β = -.242, p <.001).

Positive affect and negative affect were also significantly predicted by age (β = -.116, p = .004) and gender (β = 0.120, p <.001), respectively. This indicates that, during the life period of EA, increasing age is connected to decreased frequency of the positive affect, and that women tend to experience increased frequency of the negative affect. However, age and gender together explained only small amount of variance in the positive and negative affect (R^2 = .017, p = .010; R^2 = .036, p <.001; respectively).

The current presence of goals in the four areas did not significantly contribute to the explanation of the variance in well-being in EA (ΔR^2 = .011, p = .104 for life satisfaction; ΔR^2 = .010, p = .111 for the positive affect; and ΔR^2 = .005, p = .391 for the negative affect). However, t-tests revealed that emerging adults with educational goals reported significantly higher frequency of the positive affect compared to their peers without goals in this area (t = -2.893, p = .004; M = 3.95, SD = 0.96; M = 3.66, SD = 1.05; respectively). In addition, emerging adults with relationship-related goals reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and more frequent positive affect compared to their peers without relationship-related goals (t = -2.489, p = .013; M = 4.46, SD = 1.32; M = 4.16, SD = 1.36; respectively for

life satisfaction; and t = -3.206, p = .001; M = 3.98, SD = 0.98; M = 3.69, SD = 0.98; respectively for the positive affect).

Table 1. Predictors of life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect in emerging adulthood.

			95% CI				
Predictors of life satisfaction	**B**	**SE**	**LL**	**UL**	**β**	**t**	**p**
Step 1 (R^2 = .006, p = .201)							
Gender	0.145	0.131	-0.112	0.401	.044	1.107	.269
Age	-0.027	0.017	-0.060	0.006	-.065	-1.580	.115
Step 2 (ΔR^2 = .185, p <.001)							
IDEA-Experimentation	0.567	0.082	0.405	0.729	.284	6.871	**<.001**
IDEA-Negativity/Instability	-0.566	0.069	-0.702	-0.430	-.338	-8.168	**<.001**
IDEA-Identity Exploration	-0.005	0.082	-0.167	0.157	-.003	-0.062	.951
IDEA-Feeling In Between	0.080	0.086	-0.088	0.248	.044	0.938	.349
Step 3 (ΔR^2 = .011, p = .104)							
Goals-Education	0.108	0.136	-0.160	0.375	.033	0.793	.428
Goals-Personal Growth	-0.244	0.112	-0.465	-0.024	-.088	-2.176	.030
Goals-Relationships	0.171	0.117	-0.058	0.401	.059	1.467	.143
Goals-Work	0.138	0.120	-0.099	0.374	.047	1.145	.253
Predictors of positive affect							
Step 1 (R^2 = .017, p = .010)							
Gender	0.102	0.092	-0.079	0.283	.043	1.110	.268
Age	-0.035	0.012	-0.058	-0.011	-.116	-2.919	**.004**
Step 2 (ΔR^2 = .239, p <.001)							
IDEA-Experimentation	0.484	0.058	0.369	0.598	.329	8.313	**<.001**
IDEA-Negativity/Instability	-0.466	0.049	-0.562	-0.369	-.378	-9.503	**<.001**
IDEA-Identity Exploration	-0.031	0.058	-0.145	0.083	-.024	-0.535	.593
IDEA-Feeling In Between	0.057	0.060	-0.062	0.175	.042	0.941	.347
Step 3 (ΔR^2 = .010, p = .111)							
Goals-Education	0.104	0.096	-0.085	0.292	.044	1.082	.280
Goals-Personal Growth	-0.067	0.079	-0.222	0.089	-.033	-0.845	.398
Goals-Relationships	0.131	0.082	-0.031	0.292	.061	1.585	.114
Goals-Work	0.129	0.085	-0.038	0.295	.059	1.516	.130
Predictors of negative affect							
Step 1 (R^2 = .036, p <.001)							
Gender	0.248	0.077	0.097	0.399	.120	3.228	**<.001**
Age	0.007	0.010	-0.013	0.026	.026	0.679	.497
Step 2 (ΔR^2 = .272, p <.001)							
IDEA-Experimentation	-0.306	0.049	-0.402	-0.211	-.242	-6.298	**<.001**
IDEA-Negativity/Instability	0.503	0.041	0.423	0.584	.475	12.307	**<.001**
IDEA-Identity Exploration	0.079	0.049	-0.017	0.174	.070	1.618	.106
IDEA-Feeling In Between	0.004	0.051	-0.096	0.103	.003	0.073	.942
Step 3 (ΔR^2 = .005, p = .391)							
Goals-Education	-0.048	0.080	-0.205	0.109	-.024	-0.601	.548
Goals-Personal Growth	0.089	0.066	-0.041	0.219	.051	1.344	.180
Goals-Relationships	0.039	0.069	-0.096	0.174	.021	0.571	.568
Goals-Work	-0.106	0.071	-0.246	0.033	-.057	-1.504	.133

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; β = standardized regression coefficient.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The current study was aimed to investigate the ability of EA transition dimensions (identity exploration, experimentation, negativity/instability, and feeling in-between) and presence of goals in four life areas (education, work, relationships, and personal growth) to predict well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect) in EA. The results of the regression analyses revealed that, after controlling for the demographic variables (gender, age), EA transition dimensions together significantly explained the greatest amount of the variance in all three domains of well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect). More specifically, the relative contribution of EA transition dimensions to the prediction of life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect was 18%, 24%, and 27%, respectively. This indicates that individual perceptions of the life period of EA and emotions associated with transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2015) play important role in well-being of emerging adults and should be taken into consideration when exploring mental health in EA.

However, among the four EA transition dimensions, only experimentation (i.e. the perception of EA as a life period full of possibilities and exploration; Arnett, 2015; Baggio et al., 2015) and negativity/ instability (i.e. the experienced levels of stress and pressure during EA; Arnett, 2015; Baggio et al., 2015) were significant predictors of well-being of emerging adults. In line with the findings of the study by Baggio et al. (2017), the current research has provided evidence that experimentation was positive predictor of well-being, while negativity/instability was negative predictor of well-being. This means that increased experimentation and decreased negativity/instability were associated with increased levels of life satisfaction and the positive affect, and decreased level of the negative affect in emerging adults.

Moreover, experimentation was the strongest predictor of the positive affect, while negativity/ instability was the strongest predictor of the negative affect. This finding is not surprising considering the operationalization of the constructs. The positive affect reflects the frequency of joy, happiness, pleasure, and energy, while the negative affect points to the frequency of fear, anger, guilt, shame, sadness, and pain (Džuka & Dalbert, 2002). Therefore, if emerging adults perceive this life period as full of possibilities and exploration (experimentation dimension; Arnett, 2015; Baggio et al., 2015), they will experience increased frequency of the positive emotions as a result. On the other hand, if they feel stressed and under pressure (negativity/instability dimension; Arnett, 2015; Baggio et al., 2015), an increase in the negative affect will follow. In addition, negativity/instability was stronger predictor of well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect) than experimentation, which indicates that the three domains of well-being are more determined by emotions experienced during EA than by the cognitive evaluations of this period of life.

Apart from EA transition dimensions, the positive affect was also predicted by age, while the negative affect was predicted by gender. However, the demographic variables together explained only small amount of the variance in the two domains of well-being (1-4%). In this study, female gender predicted increased frequency of the negative emotions. This finding is rather inconsistent with previous research studies, which have reported higher well-being in women (Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014; Dluhosch, 2021; Matud, Bethencourt, Ibáñez, Fortes, & Díaz, 2022). One of the possible explanations is that those studies were predominantly focused on non-emotional aspects of well-being: satisfaction with relationships (Conley et al., 2014), life satisfaction (Dluhosch, 2021), or purpose in life and personal growth (Matud et al., 2022).

Next, increased frequency of the positive emotions was related to decreased age of emerging adults. Younger emerging adults can experience more positive emotions because this period of life offers many possibilities and exploration (Arnett, 2015). Further, they can experience more freedom and less responsibility in comparison to older emerging adults, who can feel to be more under pressure when facing expectations about fulfilling adult roles. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is lack of research studies exploring the role of age in relation to well-being in EA. Therefore, it is difficult to compare this finding with previous research on EA. Nevertheless, research studies on general adult samples have reported positive associations between age and well-being (Bruine de Bruin, Parker, & Strough, 2020), and the lowest levels of the negative affect in older adults compared to young adults and middle-aged group (Windsor & Anstey, 2010). Due to inconsistencies in the research findings on gender differences in well-being in EA and the lack of research on age-related changes in well-being in EA, further research is needed to analyze the effect of demographic characteristics on well-being in EA.

Last, the current study has provided evidence that the presence of goals in the areas of education, work, relationships, and personal growth did not predict well-being in EA. Nevertheless, emerging adults with educational and relationship-related goals reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and/or more frequent positive affect compared to their peers without goals in the two areas. The role of goal pursuit in relation to well-being in EA should be thus further explored. Rather than the presence of the specific goal itself, well-being in EA can be related to other aspects of goal pursuit, such as goal characteristics. In

this context, Sharon (2016) has pointed to the role of the perceived fit between goal importance and goal attainment.

The current study contributes to the research knowledge about well-being in EA (Baggio et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2011; Sharon, 2016). It has provided evidence that EA transition dimensions predict well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect) in emerging adults, and that age and gender are associated with the positive and negative affect, respectively. However, the presence of goals in four life domains (education, work, relationships, and personal growth) did not predict well-being in EA. Further research is needed to explore the role of goals in relation to well-being of emerging adults more comprehensively, for example with a more detailed focus on goal characteristics and their interactions.

There are also limitations to the study, which do not allow to generalize the research findings. First, the research sample was not representative of the population of emerging adults, although the number of participants was adequate for the purposes of the analyses. Second, self-reported research measures could have biased the responses of participants. Despite the limitations, the research findings have some implications into the psychological practice. They can be utilized in counselling to prevent decrease in well-being and to support mental health of emerging adults.

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