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Keywords

attachment, emerging adulthood, gender, peer attachment, parent attachment

Parent and Peer Attachment as Predictors of Emerging Adulthood Characteristics

Christina M. Schnyders, Steve Rainey, and Jason McGlothlin

Researchers examined parent and peer attachment as predictors of emerging adulthood characteristics, including instability, feeling in-between, self-focus, identity exploration, and possibilities. Participants included 1,501 undergraduate students ages 18 to 20 years. Based on regression analyses, peer attachment was the only statistically significant predictor of emerging adult characteristics. Gender-specific differences were also found. Relevance for emerging adult counselors is discussed.

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The transition to adulthood has been described as *emerging adulthood* (EA), a culturally constructed stage of development that has been evidenced among individuals in industrialized countries worldwide (Arnett, 2000). As such, EA is distinctly different from adolescence because of decreased parental control, increased independence, more diverse educational paths and experiences, and improved parent–child relationships as compared with adolescence (Arnett, 2015). EA also differs from young adulthood due to lack of experiences that traditionally constitute adulthood (such as marriage, career stability, etc.).

By recognizing EA as a distinct life stage, counselors can educate clients and normalize clients' experiences, thereby encouraging resilience and well-being through the therapeutic relationship (Lane, 2015). Because various relational factors, including both parent and peer attachment, influence EA (Szwedo,

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Hessel, Loeb, Hafen, & Allen, 2017; Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009), counselors may be able to enhance services for emerging adult clients through an informed understanding of the relationship between attachment and EA. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the ways that levels of parent and peer attachment predict EA characteristics.

EMERGING ADULthood

The developmental stage of EA occurs between adolescence and young adulthood. Initial studies suggested that individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 years experience EA (Arnett, 2000), but later studies expanded the range through age 29, depending on when people enter adulthood as marked by marriage, children, and a stable career (Arnett, 2015; Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Conceptually, EA is more of a process than an event (Tanner et al., 2009), and it includes the following dimensions: instability, feeling in-between, self-focus, identity exploration, and possibilities (Arnett, 2015). Although they are present during other times in a person's life, these characteristics seem to be most distinct during EA (Milevsky, Thudium, & Guldin, 2014).

EA is a stage of development when varied characteristics and emotions coexist. It is a time when independence is valued, and increased self-focus allows for self-discovery and decision making. Emerging adults are also optimistic, hold hope for the future, and experience increases in perceived well-being as well as emotional stability during this life stage (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Conversely, weak social control and comparison with others can lead to emotions such as depression and anxiety (Arnett, 2015). To understand the value of relationships in EA, attachment is an important element to consider.

Attachment

Initially conceptualized by Bowlby (1969), attachment is a term used to describe aspects of the bond between a mother and her infant child (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). This idea was later expanded to include a relational shift toward peers as evidence of healthy adolescent development (Ainsworth, 1989). The process of developing attachment occurs over a period of time and is not automatic or immediate (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment relationships can have positive and negative characteristics, and perceived security or support in a parent-child relationship affects both the tone and the trajectory for future relationships (Szwedo et al., 2017).

During EA, positive development is connected to strong parent and peer relationships (O'Connor et al., 2011), and secure attachment relationships are positively related to increased mental health, well-being, and life satisfaction (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Guarnieri, Smorti, & Tani, 2015). Therefore, exploration of parent attachment and peer attachment is warranted to understand the impact of attachment on EA characteristics.

Parent and Peer Attachment

Parent attachment is an influential factor during EA that contributes to well-being and adjustment during the college years (Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011) and that seems to enhance life satisfaction for emerging adults (Guarnieri et al., 2015). Reaching out to parents is also positively correlated with the perceived quality of the parent–child relationship among emerging adults, and women tend to perceive the quality of the parent–child relationship more favorably than men (Milevsky et al., 2014). Although emerging adults tend to rely upon their parents for emotional support (Arnett, 2015), many would prefer less parental involvement (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). Parent attachment is expressed through varying levels of trust, communication, and closeness. (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Jiang, You, Zheng, & Lin, 2017). Thus, parent attachment seems to be an important influence on EA.

Recentering describes the relational shift from the dependence of parental regulation to the interdependence of self-regulation (Tanner, 2006), making this a “pivotal point within the human life span” (Tanner & Arnett, 2011, p. 24). Peer attachment has been shown to positively impact adjustment to college during EA (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Additionally, perceived competence in the transition to adulthood was positively related to peer friendship quality for women (Haydon, 2015), and Kawamoto (2015) showed that peer attachment relationships shape social identity during EA. Szwedo et al. (2017) suggested that individuals in EA tend to seek support from best friends rather than parents at age 18, but emerging adults’ ability to seek support from friends may be influenced by parental support. As with parent attachment, peer attachment is expressed through varying levels of trust, communication, and closeness (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Jiang et al., 2017). Both parent attachment and peer attachment have been shown as positively related to life satisfaction in EA (Guarnieri et al., 2015).

Research on the relationship between gender and attachment has yielded contradictory findings. Among emerging adults, women have been shown to demonstrate higher levels of support and intimacy (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009), are drawn toward others more when stressed (Del Giudice, 2009), and have higher levels of trust and communication compared with men (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012). Emotional control, family relationships, and community orientation are stronger predictors of positive development during EA for men than for women (O’Connor et al., 2011). However, Bakermans-Kranenburg and Van Ijzendoorn (2009) found no significant differences regarding attachment characteristics based on gender.

Although studies have explored the types of relationships college students experience and the relationship between attachment and gender differences, no research to date has explored the complex relationships between attachment, gender differences, and characteristics associated with EA as measured by the

instruments used in this study. A study of these relationships could provide findings that inform clinical practice with emerging adult clients by highlighting relationship characteristics that affect emerging adulthood experiences. Therefore, our study was designed to explore attachment as a predictor of EA characteristics among undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 20. The research hypothesis for this study was that attachment would positively predict EA characteristics.

METHOD

Following institutional review board approval, a convenience sample composed of volunteer undergraduate participants was recruited from a large university in the Midwest. An online survey containing the instruments for this study was created, and an email containing a web link to the online survey was sent to recruit students ($N = 9,348$) for participation. As an incentive, one participant was randomly selected to receive the original version of the Apple iPad 2. Information on the incentive was included in the recruitment email.

Participants

Individuals were recruited via email, and participants included 1,501 undergraduate students ages 18 to 20 years. One study instrument was normed using participants ages 18 to 23 (Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007) and the other was normed using participants ages 16 to 20 (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Thus, the instruments have been normed on relevant age groups. The mean age for participants was 19.16 ($SD = 0.78$) years. The sample included 351 (23.4%) 18-year-olds, 558 (37.2%) 19-year-olds, and 592 (39.4%) 20-year-olds. The majority of participants were female ($n = 1,106$, 73.7%) and Caucasian ($n = 1,304$, 86.9%). Demographic data revealed that there were 107 African American participants (6.6%), 26 Asian/Pacific Islander participants (1.6%), 52 participants who identified with more than one race (3.2%), and 39 participants who classified themselves as “other” in terms of ethnicity (2.4%).

Instruments

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) contains 28 questions about parent attachment and 25 questions about peer attachment using a Likert-type scale with the following responses: *almost never or never true*, *not very often true*, *sometimes true*, *often true*, and *almost always or always true*. The IPPA explores three dimensions related to parent and peer relationships: trust, communication, and alienation (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Sample items are as follows: “I can count on my parents when I need to get something off my chest” (trust), “I can tell my friends about my problems

and troubles” (communication), and “My parents don’t understand what I’m going through these days” (alienation).

The scores for each item are summed to create a total composite score, and subscores are also calculated for each of the three dimensions of attachment. Alienation scores and all negatively worded items are reverse scored. Test–retest reliability for the IPPA was .93 for parent attachment and .86 for peer attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). In our study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .83 based on six items. For the IPPA, Armsden and Greenberg (1987) established convergent validity with significant correlations between IPPA constructs and constructs from other inventories measuring similar characteristics, such as the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and the Inventory of Adolescent Attachment. The three-factor model of attachment used in the IPPA (trust, communication, and alienation) also provides a more complete outline of attachment than a one-factor model (attachment) or a two-factor model (trust–communication and alienation; Pace, Martini, & Zavattini, 2011).

The Inventory of the Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA; Reifman et al., 2007) measures six dimensions of development: identity exploration, experimentation/possibilities, negativity/instability, other-focused, self-focused, and feeling “in-between” (Arnett, 2015). Other-focused was a later addition as a dimension of EA and was incorporated into the IDEA to contrast with self-focused (Reifman et al., 2007). Sample questions for each of the six dimensions of development are as follows: “Is this period of your life a time of defining yourself?” (identity exploration); “Is this period of your life a time of exploration?” (experimentation/possibilities); “Is this period of your life a time of unpredictability?” (negativity/instability); “Is this period of your life a time of responsibility for others?” (other-focused); “Is this period of your life a time of independence?” (self-focused); and “Is this period of your life a time of feeling adult in some ways but not others?” (feeling in-between).

The scores for each of the 31 items are summed to create a total composite score. Subscores were also calculated for each of the six dimensions of EA. Test–retest reliability was found to be significant ($p < .01$) for all IDEA dimensions: identity exploration (.66), experimentation (.76), negativity (.72), other-focused (.64), self-focused (.65), and feeling in-between (.37). Convergent validity was also shown through finding significant correlations between constructs on the IDEA and constructs from other inventories seeking to measure similar characteristics, including the Satisfaction With Life Scale, the Self-Mastery Scale, the Envisioned Possible Future Selves Scale, and the Future Orientation Scale (Reifman et al., 2007).

A demographic form was used to collect data regarding the sample. The demographic form was also used to screen for participants who did not fit the criteria ($n = 113$) for this study (e.g., those who were outside the age range). Participants also reported their gender, ethnicity, and age.

RESULTS

Parent attachment scores for the entire sample ranged from 28 to 139 ($M = 102.05$, $SD = 20.92$), and peer attachment scores for the entire sample ranged from 38 to 125 ($M = 97.61$, $SD = 15.63$). Scores for EA ranged from 58 to 121 ($M = 100.06$, $SD = 8.343$). Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations for the sample by gender.

Correlations were analyzed between parent attachment, peer attachment, and EA. Statistical significance for this study was determined by setting alpha at .01, power at .80, and maintaining a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). Results showed that peer attachment was significantly related to EA ($r = .13$, $p < .01$), whereas parent attachment was not significantly related to EA. However, a significant correlation was found between parent attachment and peer attachment ($r = .33$, $p < .01$). Small gender differences were revealed for the sample: peer attachment had a stronger correlation with EA for men ($r = .20$, $p < .01$) than for women ($r = .08$, $p < .01$).

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted using the predictor of peer attachment and EA as the criterion variable. Results from the stepwise regression model are displayed in Table 2. For men, stepwise regression results indicated that only two variables significantly contributed to the regression model: peer trust ($B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = .34$) and peer alienation ($B = -0.39$, $SE = 0.14$, $\beta = -.18$). Likewise, only two variables significantly contributed to the regression model for women: peer communication ($B = 0.45$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = .32$) and peer alienation ($B = -0.45$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = -.25$). The regression model for men predicted 6.6% of the variance, and the regression model for women predicted 6.5% of the variance. Overall, the analysis of the data suggested that the regression equation was significant; however, peer attachment seemed to uniquely predict EA characteristics regardless of gender. Therefore, results supported the hypothesis that attachment predicted EA characteristics. Because of this, the null hypothesis was rejected.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results from this study, peer attachment seems to be more predictive of EA characteristics than parent attachment, which underscores the

TABLE 1
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Parent Attachment, Peer Attachment, and Emerging Adulthood

Gender	Parent Attachment		Peer Attachment		Emerging Adulthood	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Men (<i>n</i> = 395)	99.32	19.67	93.79	15.89	97.84	9.00
Women (<i>n</i> = 1,106)	103.03	21.27	98.98	15.33	100.83	7.95

TABLE 2
Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis of Emerging Adulthood for Men and Women

Step and Predictor Variable	Men (<i>n</i> = 395)			Women (<i>n</i> = 1,106)		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Step 1						
Constant	86.97	2.50				
Peer trust	0.27	0.06	.22			
Step 2						
Constant	90.67	2.81				
Peer trust	0.42	0.08	.34			
Peer alienation	-0.39	0.14	-.18			
Step 1						
Constant				93.50	1.33	
Peer communication				0.23	0.04	.17
Step 2						
Constant				97.93	1.46	
Peer communication				0.45	0.05	.32
Peer alienation				-0.45	0.07	-.25
<i>R</i> ²		0.47			0.28	
ΔR^2		0.02			0.04	
<i>F</i>		19.60			31.38	
ΔF		7.64			44.58	

developmental process of recentering in EA (Tanner & Arnett, 2011). Although the results of this study highlight the recentering process from parent to peer attachment (Tanner & Arnett, 2011) as significant, further research is needed to clarify the role of attachment style in EA. In contrast with peer attachment, parent attachment was not significantly related to experiencing EA characteristics.

Furthermore, peer alienation was among the strongest predictors of EA characteristics for both men and women. Peer trust was highly predictive for men, as was peer communication for women. In addition, a small, positive correlation was found between gender and EA. Thus, as peer attachment (including areas of trust, communication, and alienation) increases, EA characteristics increase as well, aligning with the finding that strong peer relationships are associated with positive development in EA (O'Connor et al., 2011). More specifically, the correlation between peer attachment and EA characteristics for men was found to be stronger than the correlation between peer attachment and EA characteristics for women. This gender difference is underscored by the assertion that men and women experience EA differently (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013; O'Connor et al., 2011). Findings from this study support the idea that compared with emerging adult men, emerging adult women are characterized by higher levels of support and intimacy (Barry et al., 2009), have higher levels of communication and trust (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012), and are more drawn toward others when stressed (Del Giudice, 2009). However, results from this

study conflict with findings from other studies that showed no significant differences regarding attachment based on gender (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 2009).

Various limitations were present in this study. First, the sample was a convenience sample primarily composed of Caucasian women who used a self-report format to provide information; thus, generalizability is limited and may not be applicable to more diverse populations. In addition, the sample included college students between the ages of 18 and 20 years, which does not include the full 18-to-29 age range for EA; therefore, generalizability is limited with regard to older emerging adults and emerging adults who are not college students. Future studies should include multiple observations to better understand how attachment predicts characteristics associated with EA. Findings from this study highlight the value of peer attachment in predicting EA experiences, but further research is needed to clarify how attachment style affects EA. Although caution is warranted regarding the application of these findings based on these limitations, the results of this study have implications for counselors who work with EA.

IMPLICATIONS

By understanding the link between peer attachment and EA, counselors can conceptualize ways in which peer relationships can affect one's sense of self and one's self-concept in relation to others. In so doing, counselors can explore how the therapeutic relationship impacts the responses and experiences of the client (Lane, 2015). On the basis of the results from this study, counselors should recognize that gender-specific differences exist for EA (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013) and explore how gender differences may shape EA experiences. The importance of peer trust and peer alienation as predictors of experiences of EA among men has significant implications with regard to counseling. For instance, increasing levels of trust and decreasing levels of alienation is vital for emerging adult men to feel safe to explore issues in counseling, and establishing trust may impact the likelihood that men will continue to set up and attend counseling appointments as well. Moreover, assessing the roles that peer trust and peer alienation have with regard to clients' sense of well-being would be beneficial for men who attend counseling. As counselors learn to acknowledge the importance of peer trust and peer alienation with emerging adult men, it would seem that the therapeutic alliance will be enhanced, which in turn may encourage clients to understand how their attachment relationships impact their view of themselves, their perception of counseling, and their ability to proceed through the developmental experiences of EA. Through treatment planning, counselors could assist men to explore trust in relationships and focus on overcoming trust barriers in order to also address perceived feelings of alienation.

In addition, recognizing the role of communication patterns and feelings of alienation among clients' peer relationships may help counselors to better assess and provide optimal treatment to emerging adult women. In developing the therapeutic alliance, counselors establish rapport by using clear communication regarding the therapeutic process, which in turn can help limit feelings of alienation as clients are informed and empowered to participate in treatment. Counselors can also help clients identify ways that communication patterns and emotional connection to others seem to impact emerging adult experiences. For example, treatment plans for emerging adult women could contain ways to explore communication patterns and to enhance relational connectedness to others.

CONCLUSION

The relationships between parent attachment, peer attachment, and EA are complex in nature. The findings of the current study support the hypothesis that attachment is a predictor of EA characteristics among undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 20. In light of this, counselors who recognize the potential impact of attachment relationships may be uniquely equipped to assist emerging adult clients. Additional research is needed to better understand the ways in which attachment relationships affect EA. Future research should explore the relationship between attachment and EA using different methodology (such as qualitative and mixed-methods designs) as well as more diverse populations. Outcome studies are also warranted to confirm or modify the recommendations provided for counseling emerging adult clients. In so doing, further research can encourage excellence in clinical practice, thereby helping counselors acknowledge qualities, characteristics, and relationships that are unique or meaningful for emerging adult clients.

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