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Emerging adulthood features and criteria for adulthood: Variable- and person-centered approaches

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ABSTRACT

Reaching adulthood is the aim of the transition to adulthood; however, emerging adults differently define both adulthood and the transitional period they are living. Variable-centered and person-centered approaches were integrated in the present paper to investigate if the criteria used to define adulthood are linked to how emerging adults perceive the transitional phase they are going through. Participants were 1513 emerging adults (53.60% female; 807 university students and 706 young workers), aged from 19 to 30 years. Participants completed self-report measures about dimensions of emerging adulthood and criteria for adulthood. Main results revealed that, according to the variable-centered approach, criteria of adulthood and dimensions of emerging adulthood are only slightly associated, while the person-centered approach revealed that people who have a composite view of adulthood are also less probably perceiving their emerging adulthood as a period characterized by a lack of possibilities. Implications and future lines of research are discussed.

In recent decades, growing attention has been devoted to the process through which young people navigate from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett 2000a, 2000b; Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2008). Emerging adults' perceptions of this developmental phase have been found to be characterized by a certain ambivalence (self-focus versus other focus; feeling in-between; age of instability–age of possibilities; Arnett 2004). The reason seems to be linked to an increasing uncertainty about the criteria used to define adulthood. Indeed, the traditional transitional markers used in the past as rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood (financial independence, employment, house ownership, marriage, and parenthood) are increasingly delayed, and there is a debate on whether these factors are still important to the definition of adulthood (Arnett 1998; Lowe et al. 2013; Nelson and Barry 2005; Reitzle 2006).

The social instability that is usually linked to the delay of the transitional markers (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011) and the ambivalence associated with the definition of adulthood determine a complex situation that challenges emerging adults in their transition to

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adulthood. Thus, the lack of socially shared and normative views of adulthood increases the possibility to experiment with different patterns (both among and within cultures) of transition (Buhl and Lanz 2007). Youths are challenged to build their personal view of adulthood and consequently undergo their transitional period.

However, no study has yet considered if the emerging adults' representation and definition of adulthood could be linked to their feelings about how they are living the transitional period itself. If they were linked, it would mean that emerging adults' representation of the characteristics of adulthood could change their feelings regarding the transitional period and vice versa. For example, if an emerging adult thought that being economically independent defined adulthood, and he/she is still in a precarious job situation, then he/she could feel to be in-between or perceive instability in his/her life. On the contrary, if economic stability is not a criterion for adulthood for him/her, then job position would not affect the perception of instability in his/her life. On the other hand, the representation of the transitional period could change the criteria for adulthood. For instance, if an emerging adult lives in a precarious working situation for long time, then he/she could redefine his/her main criteria for adulthood (no longer linked to the economic stability) in order to define him/herself as an adult.

Despite the theoretical possibility of an association between the perception of criteria for adulthood and perception of the transitional phase, no empirical investigation of that association has been conducted before. Such an empirical investigation is important because the variability that emerging adults show in their perception of their transitional period could be better explained. This knowledge could provide new insights that could be used to help emerging adults to positively live their transition and to become adults in our society. The present study, adopting both a variable-centered and a person-centered approach, aimed to analyze if and how the perception of the criteria for adulthood is linked to the perception of the features of the transition itself, through the view of emerging adults.

Criteria for adulthood

To establish when emerging adulthood ends and when adulthood actually begins is not an easy task. In fact, to define when an individual enters into adulthood, we need to identify the criteria for adulthood. Previous studies (e.g. Horowitz and Bromnick 2007; Rankin and Kenyon 2008) found great variability in the markers for adulthood, highlighting that the definition of adulthood is linked to the social and cultural context in which it is provided.

Integrating anthropological, sociological, and psychological frameworks, Arnett (1997, 2001) proposed considering a large array of criteria that could be used to define adulthood. Those criteria have been grouped into seven categories. The first category, *independence*, stresses the importance of becoming independent, including criteria about both psychological independence (e.g. accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, not being deeply tied to parents emotionally) and physical independence (e.g. no longer living in parents' house, becoming financially independent from parents). The second category focuses on *interdependence*, including criteria such as becoming less

self-oriented and more committed to long-term romantic relationships. The third category includes criteria related to *role transitions* (e.g. finish one's education, get married, have at least one child, and settle into a long-term career). The fourth category is focused on *norm compliance* (e.g. avoid becoming drunk, avoid illegal drugs, and avoid drunk driving). The fifth category consists of *biological transitions*, such as to become biologically capable of rearing and bearing children. The sixth category comprises *chronological transitions*, such as having reached age 18. The last category is focused on *family capacities* (e.g. to become capable of caring for children or running a household). An alternative model has been proposed by Badger, Nelson, and Barry (2006), who kept the categories of *role transitions, norm compliance, and family capacities*, but merged the *independent* and *interdependent* criteria in a unique category called *relational maturity*, and the biological and chronological categories into one category called *biological/age transitions*.

Empirical research conducted in the USA (e.g. Arnett 1997, 2001; Nelson and Barry 2005) has consistently shown that, for emerging adults, the most important set of criteria used to define when a person is an adult are those referring to independence achievement. In contrast, criteria related to role transitions were rated as the least important criteria for adulthood (Arnett 2001). Research conducted outside the USA confirmed the importance assigned to one of the independence criteria, 'accepting responsibility of the consequences of own actions' (Danish emerging adults, Arnett and Padilla-Walker 2015; Italian emerging adults, Crocetti and Tagliabue, forthcoming; Romanian emerging adults, Nelson 2009), but also found some cultural specificities.

In a sample of Romanian emerging adults, criteria linked with relational maturity were evaluated as very important: 'decide on personal beliefs/values independently of parents or other influences', and 'being financially independent of parents'), whereas the least important were the criteria linked with role transitions (Nelson 2009). For Italian, Indian, and Chinese emerging adults, criteria regarding family capacities were considered as highly important (Crocetti and Tagliabue, forthcoming; Seiter and Nelson 2011; Zhong and Arnett 2014). In the Italian sample, norm compliance criteria, and in particular 'avoiding drunk driving' and 'avoiding committing petty crimes' were considered very important, and 'being not deeply tied to parents emotionally' being the least important (Crocetti and Tagliabue, forthcoming). In the Indian sample, relational maturity was considered important, whereas criteria about biological/age transitions (for instance 'grown to full height') were the least important (Seiter and Nelson 2011). In a Chinese sample composed of Chinese migrant women, family capacities, as well as 'settling into a long-term career', were regarded as very important criteria (Zhong and Arnett 2014). In a cross-cultural study, which compared Chinese and American students, both groups assigned the highest importance to relational maturity, followed by norm compliance (Badger, Nelson, and Barry 2006). Moreover, the importance assigned by Chinese students to all the criteria was higher than the importance assigned by American students, with the exception of the biological/age criteria, evaluated as the least important by all the students. The results of these studies reveal that the importance assigned to the different criteria, or set of criteria, varies across cultures, suggesting that the definition of adulthood is not universally shared (Spéder, Murinkó, and Settersten 2014).

Perception of emerging adulthood

A growing body of literature has focused on the way young people perceive their transitional period of life, guided by Arnett's (2004) five features of emerging adulthood. According to Arnett's theory, emerging adulthood is the *age of identity exploration*, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work. Second, it is the *age of feeling in-between* because the majority of emerging adults feel they are no longer adolescents but not yet fully adults (Arnett 1998, 2001). Third, emerging adulthood is a *self-focus period* of the life stage, in which individuals are not subjected anymore to restrictions of adolescence, mainly imposed by their parents and by high school attendance and, at the same time, they are free from the obligations and responsibilities typical of adulthood (Arnett 2004). Fourth, emerging adulthood is the *age of instability*. Having the possibility to explore a large array of alternatives during this period can be exalting, providing individuals with a unique opportunity for experimenting various roles and trying different possibilities, but, at the same time, might be distressing and confusing. Finally, emerging adulthood is the *age of possibilities* because it tends to be an optimistic time of life, in which people are likely to believe they would succeed in achieving their personal goals even amidst the difficult economic conditions facing their generation as a whole (Arnett 2000b).

Studies conducted in the USA (Facio et al. 2007; Fierro Arias and Moreno Hernández 2007) and in Europe (Fierro Arias and Moreno Hernández 2007; Macek, Bejček, and Vaníčková 2007; Negru 2012; Sirsch et al. 2009) indicated that emerging adults scored higher on the features of possibilities, identity exploration, feeling in-between, and self-focus, and scored lower on the feature of instability. Moreover, a recent cross-cultural study that compared Italy with Japan (Crocetti et al. 2015) showed cross-national differences at the level of those features. Specifically, Japanese emerging adults scored significantly higher than Italians on all the features, but especially on the perception of emerging adulthood as a period of possibilities.

Besides cultural factors, individual and relational factors also influence these perceptions of emerging adulthood. In this respect, Reifman, Arnett, and Colwell (2006) found that never-married emerging adults scored higher in identity exploration, possibilities, and self-focus compared to their engaged/married counterparts. Similarly, individuals living with friends scored higher on possibilities compared to those living with a partner/spouse. Self-reported working-class respondents scored higher on instability and lower on self-focus than their upper- and middle-/upper-class counterparts. College students exceeded their similar age non-college counterparts on sense of experimentation/possibilities. Those data demonstrate how differences in living the transitional markers (e.g. marriage) are linked with differences in perceiving the emerging adulthood features. Building upon this literature, we can hypothesize that differences in perceiving the importance of criteria for adulthood might be linked to differences in perceiving the emerging adulthood features.

Variable-centered and person-centered approaches

Most of the extant literature focusing on the transition to adulthood adopted a variable-centered approach. In the variable-centered approach, the focus is on the variables,

whereas the individuals are equal representatives of the population (Von Eye and Bogat 2006). This means that researchers are interested in finding a general model of variables relation, which is useful to describe the behavior of people. The variable-centered approach applied to the transition to adulthood has allowed understanding that the duration of the transition to adulthood is increasing, and has shared characteristics between people (e.g. uncertainty, feeling in-between and the idea that an adult is a person who is responsible).

On the contrary, the study of the individual uniqueness of the transitional process is less analyzed (see Keller, Cusick, and Courtney 2007 for an exception). Some authors (Buhl and Lanz 2007; Hendry and Kloep 2010; Kloep and Hendry 2014) stressed that the transition to adulthood is not a unique and linear developmental phase for all emerging adults: the patterns differ according to both different cultural contexts and different life experiences of emerging adults. The person-centered approach is the best approach to investigate the specificities of those patterns and their characteristics according to the individuality of emerging adults. In this approach, the aim is to understand if there are unique subgroups within a certain population in which the characteristics and the pattern of dynamics are specific for each distinct subgroup (Von Eye and Bogat 2006). According to Magnusson and Allen (1983, 372): 'The person oriented approach to research (in contrast to the variable-centered approach) takes a holistic and dynamic view; the person is conceptualized as an integrated totality rather than as a summation of variables.' In this study, we integrated both approaches to gain a better understanding of the interplay between perceptions of emerging adulthood and criteria for adulthood.

The present study

In line with the literature reviewed above, the purpose of this study was to examine if the criteria adopted by emerging adults to define adulthood could be associated with their perception of emerging adulthood. In order to address this issue, we integrated variable-centered and person-centered approaches, since these methods could help us identify any association between the criteria for adulthood and feeling about the transition to adulthood. Moreover, the integration of the two approaches could shed light on whether that association is explained by an association among variables (some criteria for adulthood are linked to some feelings about the transition to adulthood), by the existence of specific patterns (some groups of people share some criteria and some feelings, other groups of people share a different pattern of association among criteria and feelings), or by both of them.

To do this, we first examined the associations between the criteria adopted to define adulthood and the perception of emerging adulthood's features within a variable-centered approach. We hypothesized that the more criteria for adulthood linked with individual characteristics (such as biological/age transition or respect of legal rules) are important, the more the emerging adulthood is characterized to be a self-focused age, a period in which it is possible to explore one's identity and a period full of possibilities. On the contrary, the more role transitions (getting married, being employed, etc.) are important to the definition of adulthood, the more emerging adulthood is characterized by a high level of instability or feeling 'in-between', because of the present situation in which there is high uncertainty regarding role transitions. Prior studies showed that when young people

overcome some transitional markers, such as marriage or getting a job, they change their perception of emerging adulthood features (Reifman, Arnett, and Colwell 2006). Those findings show that a change in the social roles of young people (they become a husband/wife, or a worker) could affect the way people feel and live the transition to adulthood itself. Our interpretation of that is linked with the role of social norms and social representations of what is adulthood. For instance, if one shared criterion of adulthood is to have a stable job, then becoming a worker could decrease the instability perceived by the emerging adult, not only because he/she earn money with that job, but because he/she is recognized as an *adult* worker.

Second, we analyzed the interplay of criteria for adulthood and perceptions of emerging adulthood at the individual level, while adopting a person-centered approach. As a preliminary step, we will examine whether it is possible to individuate clusters of people, within the sample, that share similar views about the importance assigned to various criteria for adulthood and groups of youth sharing their views of the transitional phase they are living. In this respect, a person-centered approach can provide new insights to understanding the psychological features of young people (e.g. Crocetti et al. 2011; Crocetti and Meeus 2014). The reason is that each emerging adult can face several steps, and change his/her path to adulthood several times before saying 'I think of myself as an adult.' Moreover, each individual could have a different multidimensional representation of adulthood and of criteria for adulthood. Thus, besides knowing which are the most important criteria for adulthood (e.g. Arnett 2001; Nelson 2009), it would also be interesting to examine whether there is a subgroup of people who considers criteria linked to family and interpersonal relationships as the most important, while another subgroup considers the criteria linked to independence as the most important. If this were the case, then there might be a multidimensional representation of what adulthood is and the criteria that define it. Due to the lack of person-oriented studies about the transition to adulthood, it was difficult to formulate specific hypotheses about the profile of various groups and the interplay of groups of emerging adults sharing similar views regarding criteria for adulthood and groups of respondents sharing similar views of emerging adulthood. The only study that did so (Keller, Cusick, and Courtney 2007) focused on a specific subsample of youth (youth about to exit foster care) and on events and markers of the transition, not on subjective perceptions of the situation and of adulthood.

Method

Research participants

Participants were 1513 Italian emerging adults (702 males and 811 females), aged from 19 to 30 years (M_{age} = 24.02 years, SD_{age} = 3.35). Most of the emerging adults lived with their family of origin (71.1%) and were involved in a romantic relationship (63.1%). Approximately half of the sample consisted of university students (53.3%) and half of young workers (46.7%). Among the students, 61.1% were from the faculty of social sciences, 11.3% from engineering and technical science, and 27.6% from life sciences. Among the workers, 45.8% had a permanent job, 43.9% a temporary job, and 10.3% were self-employed. This study is part of a broader cross-cultural project investigating the perceptions of emerging adulthood and transition to adulthood in Italian and

Japanese youth (Crocetti et al. 2015). Some preliminary findings regarding criteria for adulthood were also presented in a book chapter (Crocetti and Tagliabue, forthcoming).

Procedure

Students were contacted in university buildings and workers were contacted in work contexts (e.g. factories, offices, etc.) by a researcher. Both students and workers were provided with information about the research aims, and asked for their voluntary consent to participate. Anonymity was guaranteed. The participants completed the study measures as an anonymous self-report questionnaire.

Measures

The questionnaire packet included sociodemographic questions (e.g. gender and occupation) and scales aimed at assessing the emerging adults' perception of the importance of the criteria for adulthood and of the transitional phase.

Criteria for adulthood

Criteria for adulthood were assessed by asking participants to rate the importance of 31 criteria that can be used to decide if a person is an adult (Arnett 2001; Badger, Nelson, and Barry 2006; Nelson et al. 2007). The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). Some examples of the items are 'to be financially independent of parents'; 'to accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions'; 'to reach age 18'; and 'to be married'. In order to evaluate the existence of the categories proposed by Arnett (2001) and Badger, Nelson, and Barry (2006), descriptive and explorative factor analyses were conducted. Among the 31 criteria, 14 exhibited severe non-normal distributions (skewness and/or kurtosis > 2). These criteria were considered highly important by the entire sample, suggesting that Italian respondents considered an adult as a person who assumes his/her own responsibility, has finished education, obtained a license, is employed in a stable job, takes care of his/her family, and respects the law. Due to the lack of variability in the answers, these criteria could not be used in the following analyses. The other 17 criteria were analyzed through an exploratory factor analysis, with the principal axis factoring extraction method and oblimin rotation. Two were excluded due to low correlations with the other items. Four factors were extracted, which partially follow Badger, Nelson, and Barry's (2006) structure: role transitions (sample item 'how important is it to be married'; $\alpha = .75$; five items); age transitions (sample item 'how important is it to be 18 years old'; $\alpha = .86$; two items); relational maturity (sample item 'how important is it to establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult'; $\alpha = .53$; four items); and norm compliance (sample item 'how important is it to avoid becoming drunk'; $\alpha = .63$; three items).

Dimensions of emerging adulthood

Perception of emerging adulthood was assessed with the short form (Crocetti et al. 2015) of the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA; Reifman, Arnett, and Colwell 2006). The IDEA short form consists of 15 items with a response scale ranging from 1

(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items can be grouped into five dimensions, each with three items: identity exploration (sample item: 'is this period of your life a time of defining yourself?'; *a* = .67); instability (sample item: 'is this period of your life a time of feeling stressed out?'; *a* = .78); self-focus (sample item: 'is this period of your life a time of self-sufficiency?'; *a* = .64); feeling 'in-between' (sample item: 'is this period of your life a time of feeling adult in some ways but not others?'; *a* = .73); and possibilities (sample item: 'is this period of your life a time of many possibilities?'; *a* = .68).

Results

Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1.

Associations between criteria for adulthood and emerging adulthood features: A variable-centered approach

We first examined the associations between criteria for adulthood and features of emerging adulthood at the variable level. Thus, within the variable-centered approach, we conducted correlational analyses to test the link between criteria and emerging adulthood features. The results are displayed in Table 1.

As can be seen, significant and positive correlations were found between all the four criteria for adulthood and identity exploration, indicating that the more young people perceived important role transition, age transition, relational maturity, and/or norm compliance, the more they perceived emerging adulthood as a period of identity exploration. No criteria for adulthood was significantly correlated with the perception of emerging adulthood as a period of possibilities, with the exception of relational maturity: the more relational maturity is perceived as important to the definition of adulthood, the more young people perceive emerging adulthood as a period of possibilities. Role transitions and relational maturity were positively correlated with the perception of instability during emerging adulthood: the more importance was attributed to role transitions and relational maturity, the more instability was perceived in emerging adulthood. Role transitions, relational maturity, and norm compliance were positively correlated to the perception of emerging adulthood as a self-focused period: the more young people defined adulthood using criteria linked to role transitions, relational maturity, and/or norm compliance, the more they perceived their transitional phase as focused on themselves. Finally,

Table 1. Correlations among criteria for adulthood and dimensions of emerging adulthood and descriptive statistics of constructs.

	Identity exploration	Possibilities	Instability	Self-focused	Feeling 'in-between'	*M* (SD)
Role transitions	.12***	−.02	.08**	.08**	.06*	3.96 (0.82)
Age transitions	.10***	.00	−.00	.01	.07**	3.25 (1.25)
Relational maturity	.14***	.06*	.12***	.08**	.06*	4.19 (0.58)
Norm compliance	.11***	.00	.01	.10***	.03	3.98 (0.89)
M (SD)	3.55 (0.81)	3.41 (0.82)	3.37 (0.91)	3.59 (0.78)	3.50 (0.90)	

Note: *N* = 1513.
*p < .05.
**p < .01.
***p < .001.

the perception of emerging adulthood as characterized by feeling 'in-between' was positively linked with the importance attributed to role transitions, age transitions, and relational maturity. Despite the statistical significance of those correlations, it should be noted that they were very small (i.e. around |.10|), such that shared variance among variables related to criteria for adulthood and variables related to dimensions of emerging adulthood ranged from 0.4% to 1.9%.

Subgroups for criteria for adulthood and emerging adulthood features: A person-centered approach

Second, we sought to understand if there is an association among subgroups of young people who differently represent the adulthood, assigning different importance to the criteria selected, and subgroups of young people who differently perceive the overall characteristics of emerging adulthood. In order to reach this aim, we applied a person-centered approach.

We identified groups of young people sharing similar views by means of cluster analyses conducted separately for criteria for adulthood and dimensions of emerging adulthood. The two-stage approach (Gore 2000) was carried out in order to jointly combine the strengths of the hierarchical and *k*-means clustering algorithms. Specifically, in the first step, a hierarchical cluster analysis based on Ward's method was applied to identify the number of clusters. In the second step, initial cluster centers were used as non-random starting points in iterative *k*-means clustering, to obtain the final classification of participants. We compared cluster solutions with two, three, four, five, and six clusters, and we chose the best solution on the basis of the following three criteria: theoretical meaningfulness, parsimony, and explanatory power (Milligan and Cooper 1985).

The two-stage cluster analysis on criteria for adulthood yielded two clusters (Figure 1).

A first cluster, named *composite adulthood*, contained the highest percentage of participants (61.1%) who thought that all the criteria proposed were important, showing that most participants have a composite representation of adulthood, characterized by high importance assigned to age transition, relational maturity, norm compliance, and, above all, role transitions. The second cluster, named *stereotyped adulthood*, comprised 38.9% of participants, and constituted people who could not assign importance to any of the selected criteria, showing that adulthood, for them, was defined by general criteria that are important for all young people (we excluded some criteria because of their skewness and kurtosis).

Six clusters emerged regarding the perception of emerging adulthood (Figure 2).

The first cluster, named *negative feelings* (11.5%), included people who perceived the period as characterized by high levels of instability. The second, named *positive transition* (19.3%), included people who perceived the period as characterized by low levels of instability and high levels of possibilities, self-focus, identity exploration, and feeling in-between. The third, named *self-focus* (13.5%), included people who perceived the lowest level of identity exploration and feeling in-between, combined with high levels of self-focus. The fourth, named *stall* (15.1%), included people who were not experiencing any of the transitional features identified by Arnett (2004), so they could be classified as people who were not perceiving transitional and changing patterns in their life. The
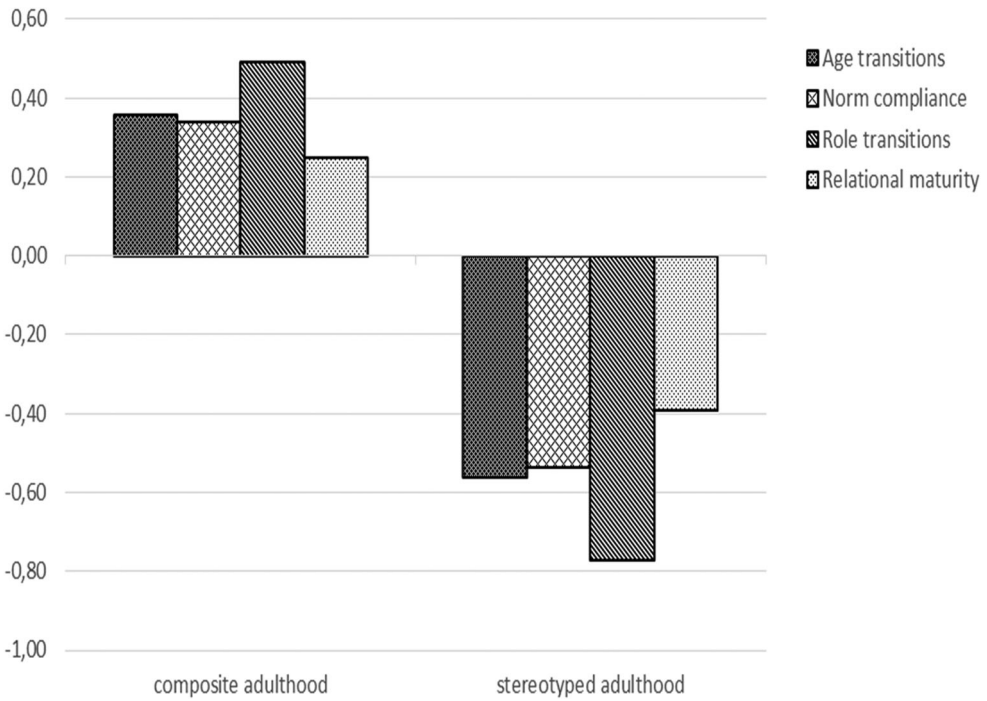
Figure 1. Clusters for criteria for adulthood.

fifth, named *lack of possibilities* (16.7%), included people who perceived the period they were living in as characterized by the lowest level of possibilities, combined with high levels of self-focus, feeling in-between, identity exploration, and medium level of
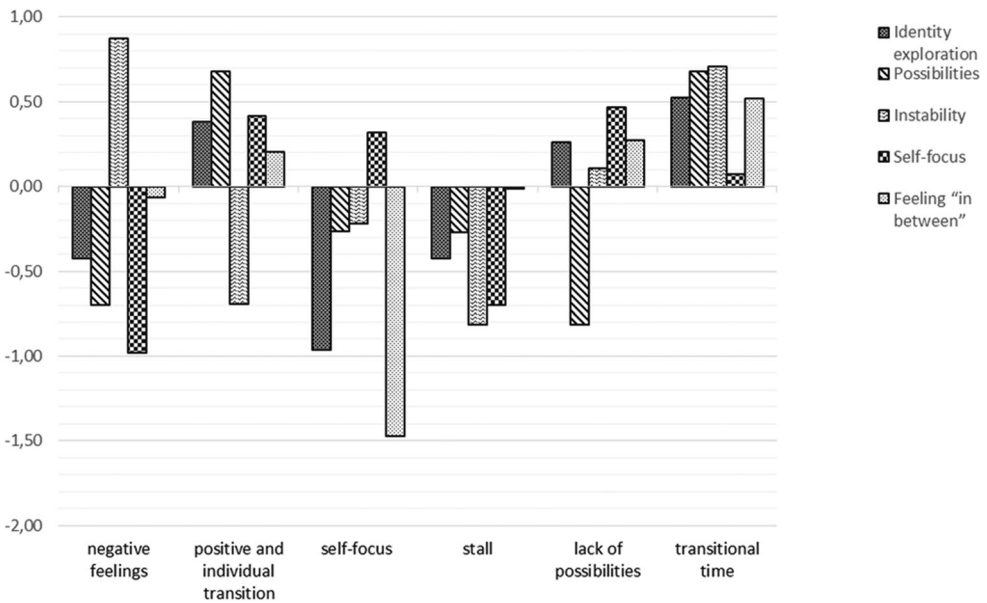

Figure 2. Clusters for perception of dimensions of emerging adulthood.

Table 2. Association between clusters.

Clusters of criteria for adulthood	Clusters of dimensions of emerging adulthood						
	Negative feelings (%)	Positive transition (%)	Self-focus (%)	Stall (%)	Lack of possibilities (%)	Transitional time (%)	Total (%)
Stereotyped adulthood	10.5	18.9	13.4	13.6	**19.5** (+)	24.2	100
Composite adulthood	13.1	19.9	13.8	17.3	**12.4** (−)	23.5	100
Total	11.5	19.3	13.5	15.1	16.7	23.9	100

Note: Observed values indicated in bold are significantly different from expected values (i.e. standardized residuals higher than |1.96|): (+) indicates that the observed value is higher than the expected value ($p < .05$); (−) indicates that the observed value is lower than the expected value ($p < .05$).

instability. Finally, the sixth, named *transitional time* (23.9%), included people who perceived the period as characterized by all the features of emerging adulthood identified by Arnett (2004), although the level of self-focus was at a medium level.

In order to examine the interplay between these two classifications, we conducted a chi-square test. The results (Table 2) were statistically significant (χ^2 (5) = 16.38, $p < .01$, Cramér's $V = .10$, $p < .01$).

In particular, standardized residuals showed that the number of people who did not consider important any of the four criteria in defining adulthood (*stereotyped adulthood* cluster) and also perceived the transitional phase as characterized by low possibilities, medium instability, and high of self-focus, feeling in-between, and identity exploration (*lack of possibilities* cluster) was more than expected. In contrast, the number of participants who thought that both individual and social criteria were similarly important in defining adulthood (*composite adulthood* cluster) and also perceived their transitional phase as characterized by low possibilities, medium instability, and high self-focus, feeling in-between, and identity exploration (*lack of possibilities* cluster) was fewer than expected.

Discussion

The present study aimed to analyze if and how emerging adults' representation of adulthood criteria was associated with the way the same emerging adults are living the transitional time from adolescence to adulthood. In order to comprehensively reach this aim, we integrated variable-centered and person-centered approaches.

Specifically, the variable-centered approach yielded several significant but weak associations between criteria for adulthood and perception of the transitional period they are living. This finding is surprising because it seems that emerging adults are living their present as, in some sense, separated from their future. A possible interpretation is linked with the duration of the transitional phase. Indeed, in the context of this study (i.e. Italy; Crocetti, Rabaglietti, and Sica 2012; Crocetti et al. 2015; Scabini and Donati 1988) as well as in several Western countries (e.g. Arnett 2004; Reitzle 2006; Tanner and Arnett 2009), the transition to adulthood is continually delayed. Thus, the longer road to adulthood can weaken the connection between how young people experience their present situation and how they organize their future views of adulthood. Billari and Liefbroer (2010) stated that a dominant pattern of the transition to adulthood is emerging in

European countries, although variability among them has been found. One characteristic of that pattern is that many events happen late in the transition (i.e. marriage and parenthood), and the duration of the transition is increasing. Moreover, many events happen during the transition in a reversible pattern (Biggart and Walther 2006), so this could be an explanation for the absence of strong links between the criteria for adulthood and the perception of emerging adulthood.

Some exceptions to the absence of that link have been found within the person-centered approach. The cluster analyses pointed out the presence of two groups for criteria for adulthood (*composite adulthood* and *stereotyped adulthood*), and six groups for perception of emerging adulthood (*negative feelings*; *positive transition*; *self-focus*; *stall*; *lack of possibilities*; and *transitional time*). Interestingly, the findings showed that there are more young people than expected who do not use role transitions, age transitions, relational maturity, or norm compliance as criteria to define adulthood and, at the same time, who are living the present period of emerging adulthood as characterized by low possibilities, medium instability, and high self-focus, feeling in-between, and identity exploration. On the contrary, there are fewer young people than expected who had a multidimensional and composite picture of adulthood and, at the same time, who are living the present as characterized by low possibilities, medium instability, and high self-focus, feeling in-between, and identity exploration. These intriguing results could be interpreted as linked to a different maturity and optimism in emerging adults. The ones who have a more complex view of adulthood and of the different paths necessary to reach it are also more engaged in their transitional phase and optimistically perceive the existence of multiple possibilities in their future. On the contrary, people who have a stereotyped and vague picture of adulthood are also more pessimistic and focused on themselves, engaging more in identity exploration, but also perceiving more ambivalence about being an adult. These findings suggest that those who perceive a lack of possibilities are especially those who have an unclear or unique view of adulthood. These could be young people who have formed a negative view about their current prospects and perceive a lower sense of control over their personal lives. More research is needed to understand if those patterns could be due to personal variables or to contextual ones, and whether they are valid also with other samples, in other cultures, and with other measures. Recently, Mary (2014) asserted that many young people have a pessimistic view of their transitional period, especially because they perceive that adults judge their adulthood only considering social maturity (i.e. achieving transitional markers such as getting a job or marrying), whereas they defined adulthood considering both social maturity and psychological maturity (being able to handle the challenges that adulthood requires and being emotionally ready and responsible). Future research could investigate whether emerging adults who perceive a lack of possibilities and have a stereotyped view of adulthood are also the ones who feel more pessimistic for those reasons.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study provided evidence that sheds light on the perceptions of emerging adults related to the phase they are going through and patterns toward adulthood, and that shows the utility of the person-centered approach to better understand the transition

to adulthood. However, many future studies remain to be conducted in order to improve the interpretation of those findings. First of all, the sample is culturally sensitive, so more cross-cultural studies are needed to investigate if those results are universally shared or if the links among the criteria chosen and the views of emerging adulthood differ according to the culture in which young people are living. Indeed, previous studies underlined the cultural specificity of the transition to adulthood, so cross-cultural comparisons are needed (Arnett 1998; Buchmann and Kriesi 2011). The findings should also be correlated to demographic characteristics (age, gender, students vs. workers, and in a committed romantic relationship or not), and to psychological characteristics (personality and identity) or outcomes (well-being and number of reached markers of adulthood). Finally, a longitudinal study is needed. It is not clear if the present time affects the representation of adulthood or if the representation affects the way young people live their transition. Longitudinal studies could help us understand if both the criteria for adulthood and the features of the transition to adulthood change during the transition itself, and how their changes are interconnected.

Conclusion

This study highlighted that the transition to adulthood, and the conception of adulthood, present some common aspects, but also a lot of unique complex patterns. The cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow understanding about whether that variability is only linked with variability among persons, or also variability during time, although our findings emphasize a more fluid and dynamic process that characterize individual and social choices during the transition, and the overall representation of the outcomes of the transition, that is, adulthood Tagliabue, Lanz, and Beyers 2014; Hendry and Kloep 2010; Horowitz and Bromnick 2007; Spéder, Murinkó, and Settersten 2014).

Disclosure statement

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