

Relation Between Emerging Adulthood and Psychological Wellbeing Amongst Indian College Students

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ABSTRACT

The theory of Emerging Adult stipulated that those who fell in the age range of 18 to 25 years displayed significantly different characteristics from those seen in adolescence as well as during adulthood. Research has shown that the mental health related challenges faced by individuals in this age group is significantly different and unique from the challenges faced by adults in the middle and older adulthood phase. To gain a deeper understanding of the mental health of Indian college students in context to emerging adulthood dimension a sample of N=155 (48 males and 107 females) was taken for the study. A questionnaire containing The Inventory of Emerging Adulthood Dimensions (IDEA) and Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWBS) was used. From the results of the study, it was seen that the dimension of personal growth shows a significant positive correlation with the dimensions of identity exploration, experimentation, self-focus and feeling in-between. For environmental mastery there exists a negative correlation with the dimensions of instability and feeling in-between. Positive relationship with others is positively correlated with identity exploration, experimentation, self-focus and feeling in-between. There was a positive correlation between purpose of life and identity exploration, experimentation, other-focus, self-focus and feeling in-between. Self-acceptance has a positive correlation with experimentation and self-focus.

Keywords: *Emerging Adulthood, Mental Health, Wellbeing, Development*

The period of young adulthood has traditionally been characterized by individuals being at their peak in terms of physical, cognitive, and social dimensions. This developmental stage is characterized by the transition of individuals from school to college, choosing their career path, forming new relationships, gaining more independence, finding jobs and much more (Mishra). However, recent research onto this developmental stage revealed that this stage of adulthood is starkly different from other stages of adulthood. This period has thus, been dubbed as 'Emerging Adulthood'. Emerging Adulthood occurs from the period of 18 to 29 years. This phase is characterized primarily by an individual adjusting to adulthood after just completing their teen years. An individual during this time is not an adolescent anymore but not quite an adult either (Whitbourne, 2012).

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Theory of Emerging Adulthood

The theory of Emerging Adult was proposed by Jeffery Jenson Arnett in the year 2000. According to his research the time after adolescence i.e., 18 to 25 years is significantly different from what individuals feel during their teenage years as well as what they should feel and experience during adulthood. The reason for the emergence of this new developmental phase is the paradigm shift in the experiences of people during this time of their life. Earlier people who fell into this age range got married, would start a family, and have a stable job, these days however, the mean age for these events have shifted to towards the period of middle adulthood in most individual's life. Another cause identified for the emergence is the push towards higher education which is a major component of young adulthood especially from 18 to 25 years when most individuals pursue their graduation and post-graduation (Arnett, 2000).

Arnett further put forward five dimensions which are considered major characteristics of this phase. These characteristics are enumerated below: (Arnett, 2006; Zorotovich, 2014)

- **Identity Exploration:** During adolescence most individuals are believed to be forming their concept of their 'self' in terms of what they believe they are and what they should be. This identity exploration continues onto the period of emerging adulthood. During this period however the individual's sense of identity develops in terms of what they decide to choose for themselves such as in the areas of career, love which will impact them in the longer run.
- **Instability:** Emerging adulthood is characterized by many major transitions in a person's life. From forming a sense of adulthood, transitioning from school to college, forming new relationships, choosing a career path these major changes create a sense of instability that these individuals face.
- **Self-Focus:** At this stage most individuals don't have any major social obligations, responsibilities, or commitments. There is a degree of newfound autonomy amongst these individuals as they are now free from following the rules and routines which were present when they lived with their parents. Furthermore, major commitments to a long-term job, spouse or children become a component of middle adulthood. Thus, in this period the individual can freely express their autonomy and make any major decisions primarily keeping themselves in mind.
- **Feeling 'In-Between':** Research conducted by Arnett showed that when individuals ranging from 18 to 25 years were asked whether they felt they had reached adulthood the most common response received was "in some ways yes, in some ways no", as most people believed they were still in the process of attaining so and were caught somewhere in between. Thus, this period is a transitional phase from feeling less like a teenager to attaining adulthood, hence the name 'emerging' adulthood.
- **Age of Possibilities:** The theory stipulates that the period of emerging adulthood can be seen as an age of possibilities for two reasons. The first reason is that most individuals during this time are seen to be very hopeful and optimistic regarding the future. The second reason is that for those individuals who had a turbulent home life, they are finally able to move out from those conditions and live their life according to their volition. In this phase people can live their lives without the pressure of major responsibilities or commitments. This phase is also referred to as experimentation.

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Psychological Wellbeing

The concept of psychological wellbeing originated from the theory of 'eudaimonic wellbeing'. Eudaimonic wellbeing postulates that an individual needs more than pleasure or satisfaction in their lives to be truly happy. According to this theory realizing one's full potential and abilities contributes highly to their wellbeing and overall happiness (Hefferon and Boniwell, 2011)

Psychological wellbeing empathizes, specifically the importance of mental health regarding one's general wellbeing. This theory was further refined by Carol Ryff (1989) who discussed six dimensions which contributed to the psychological wellbeing of an individual. These six dimensions include: (Ryff, 1989)

- *Self-Acceptance*: This dimension refers to accepting the good and the bad regarding oneself.
- *Positive Relationships with Others*: This dimension emphasizes on the ability of the individual to form meaningful and positive interpersonal relationships with friends, families, or partners.
- *Autonomy*: Having the choice to make one's own decisions is an important part of mental health. This dimension emphasizes components such as self-determination, internal locus of control and being to control one's emotions and behaviors.
- *Environmental Mastery*: Being able to assess and choose an environment which is suitable for one's mental health is referred to as environmental mastery.
- *Purpose in Life*: This dimension emphasizes on having a clear goal in one's life that they are determined to pursue. Having a sense of direction and the perseverance to achieve these goals is important for one's psychological wellbeing.
- *Personal Growth*: This dimension refers to being able to learn and grow as a person to realize one's potential and become the best versions of themselves.

Rationale

The period of 18 to 29 years is filled with its distinctive challenges which make it substantially different from adolescence and adulthood. Due to the sudden changes, such as making the transition from living with, to living apart from, parents, obtaining education or training, making their way into the workforce, and finding a life partner. These challenges make this period in a person's life unique. These challenges can, however, also impact the mental health of these individuals negatively. Thus, the rationale behind this study was to gain a deeper understanding of Indian college students in this age group. There is limited research done onto this topic in the Indian context, thus this research further contributes to the literature.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The main years of emerging adulthood as established before are generally college years for people aged between 18 to 25 years. Previously after the attainment of a college degree the individual was expected to immediately transition to having a stable job, family, and children. The trend now shows that college students in this age group now go through additional psychosocial changes before fully entering adulthood. These psychosocial changes impact the relationships, sexuality, spirituality, career related decisions and mental health concerns of this youth (Murray and Arnett, 2018).

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Like any other developmental stage Emerging Adulthood is believed to be experienced differently in different cultures. There is unfortunately very limited research done onto the Indian emerging adulthood population. Mitra and Arnett (2022) recently investigated onto this population and found that there were eight major priorities of the youth in this age group. These priorities included (in order of importance) responsibility towards their family, independence and autonomy, financial security, education and their career, parental expectations, romantic relationships, community and faith, and finally societal norms.

The changes elaborated above have a major impact on the mental health and overall psychological wellbeing of this population. Research shows that almost 1 out of every 5 emerging adult is deals with some form of an anxiety disorder which causes problems in their thinking, emotions, behaviour and can also cause physiological problems. Another common problem seen in young adults is substance abuse. The popular substances consumed by this population include alcohol, marijuana, psychotherapeutics or stimulants, cocaine, and hallucinogens. Addiction to smoking cigarettes is also very common. Around 1 out 10 emerging adults experiences a form of mood disorders, especially depressive disorders, and bipolar disorder. These disorders are more internalized which leads to the people around them at times unaware that they are struggling with the same (Tanner, 2016).

These numbers are further corroborated by MacLeod and Brownlie (2014) who also stated that anxiety, mood, and substance abuse disorders are common amongst people aged between 20 to 29 years. Furthermore, some of the reasons why these problems are present during this developmental phase are believed to be, a continuity risk i.e., these problems already exist or develop during adolescence and then persist onto emerging adulthood. Some problems go untreated and persist onto this phase, family pathology and pre-existing vulnerability to future stressors.

Another common problem seen amongst this population are eating disorders. It was seen that approximately 26.4% of emerging adults in universities dealt with unhealthy eating behaviours such as excessive exercise, consuming laxatives, fasting, or vomiting. This was seen commonly in the female participants, with around 20.7% of the female students indulging in this behaviour (Potterton, et al. 2020).

Waszczuk, et al. (2019) further investigated the aetiology of eating disorders in emerging adults. It was concluded that genetic and environmental symptoms both contribute equally to the development of the main symptoms of eating disorders, i.e., body dissatisfaction, bulimia, and a drive for thinness. The role of genetic factors was more easily discovered during the disorder in emerging adulthood, the environmental symptoms mostly changed over time and depended on the symptoms experienced by the individual, however, a few environmental symptoms were stable throughout the course of the disorder.

According to Arnett, et al. (2014) the dimensions of emerging adulthood are correlated to certain psychological disorders. Identity exploration for instance, is linked to anxiety and depressive disorders given the confusion and abundance of choices made during this period. Similarly, the dimensions of instability and feeling in between are also characterized by anxiety and/or depression especially, if the changes faced are involuntary or unexpected. Instability can also lead to the loss of adequate social support for this population which may contribute to their poor mental health. Age of possibility though considered being full of hope and optimism is seen as a disadvantage for this population. This is especially true for

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those young adults who are a part of the lower socio-economic strata who may be employed in minimum wage jobs in the future or be unemployed. Not meeting what they thought for themselves can lead to depression.

Similarly, Baggio, et al. (2017) conducted a similar study and found that the period of experimentation in emerging adulthood is associated with increased chances of developing a substance abuse disorder, however, having the autonomy to make their own decisions and explore correlates with positive psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, the dimensions of identity exploration and negativity had a negative impact on the overall psychological wellbeing of emerging adults. For the feeling in between dimension, it was seen that there was no significant impact on the wellbeing of emerging adults.

While there are certain negative connotations associated with this period towards an individual's mental health, there are some positive developmental changes which also occur during this period. Research showed that the overall social capital of an emerging adult which comprises of the dimension's civic engagement and trust and tolerance towards other and authorities develops during this period and enhances the overall life satisfaction and social competence of the emerging adult (Hawkins, et al. 2009).

This research further investigates the overall psychological wellbeing of the Indian college student population. Illango (2018) studied the psychological and general wellbeing of undergraduate college students. It was seen that a significant number of the population had depression and anxiety related issues. Anxiety especially was more significantly reported, the reason for the same being the major change undergone by the students' terms of adjustment in college and other challenges characterized during phase. Furthermore, domicile of the student also was seen to have an impact on the overall level of anxiety and general impact on wellbeing. Students from a rural background were found to have higher anxiety levels than urban background students. No significant gender differences were found in terms of overall levels of depression and anxiety, however female students were seen to have more higher level of depressive symptoms.

One study found that around 5% of Indian college students exhibit low levels of life satisfaction, while the remaining 95% exhibited average levels. For the dimension of psychological distress 1% of the students exhibited high psychological distress, 88% showed average levels and the remaining 11% scored low on this dimension. Similarly for psychological wellbeing 9% of the sample scored high, 90% scored average and the remaining 9% scored high. Moreover, it was seen that the dimensions of psychological wellbeing and psychological distress had a negative correlation with one another (Abdullah and Mushtaq, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

To assess the correlation between the dimensions of emerging adulthood and psychological wellbeing.

Description of Sample

The sample for the study consisted of N=155 individuals (48 males and 107 females) aged between 18 to 25 years. The sample consisted of those who fell in the age range of 18 to 25

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years, were Indian students currently enrolled in a college or university and were well versed in understanding basic English.

Description of Tools

The Inventory of Emerging Adulthood Dimensions was developed by Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell in 2007. This questionnaire consists of 31 items. Reifman, et al. (2007) found that the Internal consistency (alpha) reliability coefficients for the subscales were strong and ranged between .70-.85. Test-retest reliability correlations were also computed over the duration of a one-month interval, which ranged from .64 -.76, except for the “feeling in-between” subscale where it was found to be .37. Ryff’s Psychological Wellbeing Scale was developed by Carol Ryff in 1989. In 2007 this measure was adapted to include only 18 items. Lee, et al. (2019) found that Cronbach’s alpha for the 18-item measure was 0.88, with aggregated subscale alphas of 0.72–0.88, except 0.57 for autonomy, showing an overall good reliability score. For validity of the test a positive correlation was seen between perceived health and the questionnaire ($r = 0.20$, $P < 0.001$), indicating that criterion validity for the instrument was also acceptable.

Procedure

A survey consisting of an introduction to the research, mentioning the topic of the research as well as the ethical code and considerations of the study was sent to potential participants. A consent form was also attached to be duly filled by the respondents. To assess the correlation between the dimensions of the two questionnaires Pearson’s Correlation was done.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The period of 18 to 29 years is filled with its distinctive challenges which make it substantially different from adolescence and adulthood. Due to the sudden changes, such as making the transition from living with, to living apart from, parents, obtaining education or training, making their way into the workforce, and finding a life partner. These challenges make this period in a person’s life unique. These challenges can, however, also impact the mental health of these individuals negatively.

Research has shown that the mental health related challenges faced by individuals in this age group is significantly different and unique from the challenges faced by adults in the middle and older adulthood phase. Research shows that ‘identity exploration’ for instance, is linked to anxiety and depressive disorders given the confusion and abundance of choices made during this period. Similarly, the dimensions of ‘instability’ and ‘feeling in between’ are also characterized by anxiety and/or depression especially, if the changes faced are involuntary or are unexpected for the individual. Instability can also lead to the loss of adequate social support for this population which may contribute to their poor mental health. ‘Age of possibility’ though considered being full of hope and optimism is seen as a disadvantage for this population. (Arnett, et al., 2014)

Keeping in mind the aim of the study the descriptive and inferential studies was collected. The results of the same are as follows:

- A total of 155 responses were collected from individuals who fell in the age range of 18 to 25 years.

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Table 4.1 Age Based Responses

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	18	11	7.09	7.09
	19	22	14.2	14.2
	20	30	19.36	19.36
	21	40	25.81	25.81
	22	25	16.13	16.13
	23	10	6.46	6.46
	24	13	8.39	8.39
	25	4	2.59	2.59
	Total	155	100.0	100.0

The mean responses (20.95) were seen to be from individuals who were around 21 years old. There was a total of 40 responses from this age group. The least number of responses were from the individuals who were aged 25 with only 4 responses.

Table 4.2 Gender Based Responses

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	107	69.03	69.03	69.03
	Male	48	30.97	30.97	100.0
	Total	155	100.0	100.0	

The total number of responses attained from the survey was 155 out of which 107 responses were of female participants and 48 responses were of male participants.

Table 4.3 Current Education Level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Post-Graduation	54	34.84	34.84	34.84
	Under-Graduation	101	65.17	65.17	100.0
	Total	155	100.0	100.0	

Out of the 155 respondents 54 were currently pursuing their postgraduation while the other 101 were currently enrolled in an undergraduate programme.

Result of Correlational Study

To determine the relationship between the dimensions of the two factors a correlational study was undertaken using Pearson's correlation method.

Table 4.4 - Correlation Matrix of Dimensions

	Identity Exploration	Experimentation	Instability	Other Focus	Self-Focus	In-Between Feelings	Autonomy	Environmental Mastery	Personal Growth	Positive Relations with Others	Purpose of Life	Self-Acceptance
Identity Exploration	1											
Experimentation	0.874	1										
Instability	0.745	0.686	1									
Other-focused	0.595	0.568	0.567	1								
Self-Focused	0.87	0.893	0.652	0.605	1							
In-Between Feelings	0.776	0.73	0.715	0.502	0.733	1						
Autonomy	0.09	0.13	-0.05	0.08	0.1	0.05	1					
Environmental Mastery	-0.04	0.06	-0.17**	-0.13	0.08	-0.14*	0.169	1				
Personal Growth	0.26***	0.3***	0.08	0.02	0.25***	0.19***	0.469	0.263	1			
Positive Relations with Others	0.21***	0.25***	0.08	0.06	0.2**	0.21***	0.154	0.075	0.241	1		
Purpose of Life	0.26***	0.27***	0.08	0.15*	0.21***	0.19***	0.175	-0.0944	0.279	0.205	1	
Self-Acceptance	0.08	0.18**	-0.21***	-0.02	0.16**	0.02	0.285	0.47	0.409	0.287	0.238	1

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Note - * Denotes 0.1 Significance, ** Denotes 0.05 Significance, *** Denotes 0.01 Significance, Significant results are bold.

Table 4.5 Correlation of Overall Dimensions

		Emerging Adulthood	Psychological Wellbeing
Emerging Adulthood	Pearson Correlation	1	.953
	Sig. (2-tailed)		1.45
	N	155	155
Psychological Wellbeing	Pearson Correlation	.953	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1.45	
	N	155	155

From the results above, the dimension of personal growth shows a significant positive correlation with the dimensions of identity exploration ($r=.26, p=0.001$ at 0.01 significance level), experimentation ($r=0.3, p=0.00011$, at 0.01 significance), self-focus ($r=.25, p=.0016$, at 0.01 significance) and feeling in-between ($r=.19, p=.017$ at 0.05 significance). Identity exploration during the period of emerging adulthood is characterized by making choices that would impact them in the long run, making these choices whether good or bad can help leads to further experimentation. Focusing on their own preferences and wants without any worries about any major responsibilities all act as positive factors for the overall growth of the individual.

In the case of environmental mastery there exists a negative correlation with the dimensions of instability ($r=-.17, p=.034$ at 0.05 significance) and feeling in-between ($r=-.014, p=.08$ at 0.1 significance). This implies that when an individual is going to consistent changes in their life and are dealing with the transition of becoming an adult from a teenager, they are unable to take control of the environment around them and use it for their benefit.

Furthermore, the dimension of positive relationship with others is positively correlated with identity exploration ($r=.21, p=.007$ at 0.01 significance), experimentation ($r=.25, p=.0014$ at 0.01 significance), self-focus ($r=.2, p=.011$ at 0.05 significance) and feeling in-between ($r=.21, p=.009$ at 0.01 significance). Thus, it can be inferred that when the individual has meaningful interpersonal relationships it will lead to them developing as a person, lead to more experimentation, higher self focus and the transitory feeling of being in-between.

Similarly, there was a positive correlation between purpose of life and identity exploration ($r=.26, p=.001$ at 0.01 significance), experimentation ($r=.27, p=.0005$ at 0.01 significance), other-focus ($r=.15, p=.054$, at 0.1 significance), self-focus ($r=.21, p=.009$ at 0.01 significance) and feeling in-between ($r=.19, p=.018$ at 0.05 significance). This suggests that an individual's overall goal and purpose are affected when they exhibit high levels of identity exploration, exploration, focusing on their wants and needs while simultaneously focusing on the wants and needs of others, and when they exhibit high transitory feeling of being in between.

Finally, the dimension of self-acceptance has a positive correlation with experimentation ($r=.18, p=.025$ at 0.05 significance) and self-focus ($r=.18, p=.046$ at 0.05 significance). Experimenting and focusing on one's preferences lead to high levels of self-acceptance. There is also a negative correlation between self-acceptance and instability with $r=-.21, p=.009$, at 0.01 significance. This implies that when an individual is experiencing many

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changes in their life Overall, there was no significant correlation between the construct of emerging adulthood and psychological wellbeing.

Not many researchers have undertaken research to establish the relationship between the dimensions of emerging adulthood and psychological wellbeing. Waters and Fivush (2015) established that, emerging adults were able to produce a coherent assessment of themselves and their concept of self when they scored high in the psychological wellbeing dimensions of purpose of life and positive relations with others.

Karaś, et al. (2015) studied the relationship between identity and wellbeing among emerging adults in Italy, Romania, and Poland. It was determined that the dimension of commitment and identity exploration were positively related to general well-being. On the other hand, the dimension of reconsideration of commitment was negatively correlated with wellbeing for emerging adults.

CONCLUSION

From the results of the study, it can be inferred that the dimension of personal growth shows a significant positive correlation with the dimensions of identity exploration, experimentation, self-focus and feeling in-between. For environmental mastery there exists a negative correlation with the dimensions of instability and feeling in-between. Positive relationship with others is positively correlated with identity exploration, experimentation, self-focus and feeling in-between. There was a positive correlation between purpose of life and identity exploration, experimentation, other-focus, self-focus and feeling in-between. Self-acceptance has a positive correlation with experimentation and self-focus. Future studies can focus on establishing a deeper understanding of the mental health levels of this population by focusing on specific disorders, such as anxiety disorders or mood disorders, etc. Additionally, causal factors for the correlated dimensions can also be determined.

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Conflict of Interest

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