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My dear family and friends, do I need both of you to navigate toward adulthood? The relationship between identification profiles and adjustment

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**My Dear Family and Friends, do I Need Both of You to Navigate Toward Adulthood?  
The Relationship between Identification Profiles and Adjustment**

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The Relationship between Identification Profiles and Adjustment

### **English Abstract**

The present study relies on a person-centered approach to examine if emerging adults with different levels of identification with family and friends show differences in their adjustment (i.e., self-esteem, life satisfaction, and future perspectives). Participants were 474 Italian emerging adults (52.7% females), both university students (51.7%) and workers (48.3%), who completed a questionnaire. Results showed that participants highly identified with both their family and friends were more satisfied with themselves and their current life and also more optimistic about their future. In addition, high identification with one group (family or friends) mitigated the negative effects of being poorly identified with the other group.

*Keywords:* Family, Friends, Emerging adults, Adjustment, Person-centered approach

### **Italian Abstract**

Il presente studio utilizza un approccio centrato sulla persona per verificare se giovani adulti con diversi livelli di identificazione con famiglia e amici mostrano differenze nell'adattamento (vale a dire, autostima, soddisfazione per la vita, e prospettive future). I partecipanti, 474 giovani italiani (52.7% femmine), sia studenti universitari (51.7%) che lavoratori (48.3%), hanno completato un questionario. I risultati mostrano che i giovani molto identificati sia con la famiglia che con gli amici sono più soddisfatti di se stessi e della loro vita e sono più ottimisti verso il futuro. Inoltre, la forte identificazione con un gruppo (famiglia o amici) modera gli effetti negativi derivanti dall'identificarsi poco con l'altro gruppo.

*Parole chiave:* Famiglia, Amici, Giovani adulti, Adattamento, Approccio centrato sulla persona

**My Dear Family and Friends, do I Need Both of You to Navigate Toward Adulthood?****The Relationship between Identification Profiles and Adjustment**

Arnett (2000) proposed the notion of *emerging adulthood* to refer to the period comprised between the late teens through the twenties (19-29 years). Based on his conceptualization (Arnett, 2004), emerging adulthood is the age of identity exploration, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work; the age of feeling in-between, because the majority of emerging adults feel they are no longer adolescents but not yet fully adults; a self-focused period of life, in which individuals are not subjected anymore to restrictions of adolescence and, at the same time, they are free from the obligations and responsibilities typical of adulthood; the age of instability, in which is possible to explore a broad array of alternatives, activity that can be exalting but, at the same time, might be distressing and confusing; and 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 severe economic conditions facing their generation as a whole. Notably, Arnett emphasized that emerging adulthood is a period of life that is historically embedded and culturally constructed, based on the changes from the industrial to the information-based economy (Arnett, 2006; Tanner & Arnett, 2016).

In line with this cultural focus, a large body of research has been conducted to uncover the characteristics of emerging adulthood across various contexts (e.g., Buhl & Lanz, 2007; Crocetti et al., 2015; Tagliabue, Crocetti, & Lanz, 2016; Tagliabue, Lanz, & Beyers, 2014; Žukauskienė, 2016). In this respect, psychological, sociological, and demographic analyses have underlined the specificities of the Italian context. The demographer Livi Bacci (2008) introduced the concept of the “delay syndrome” to capture differences in the timing of the transition to adulthood reported by Italian youth when compared to their European peers. Five symptoms characterize this syndrome: prolongation of education; deferral of entry in the job

market and high rates of unemployment; tendency to live in the parental home till the late 20s or early 30s; postponing entry into a committed partnership; and delayed transition to parenthood.

Psychological and sociological contributions have also stressed these specific aspects of the Italian context. More specifically, Scabini and Donati (1988) introduced the notion of the “long family of the young adult” to underline that, in Italy, the transition to adulthood occurs while still in the family unit (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). Italian emerging adults use to live with their family of origin until the late 20s or the 30s, not only because of the limited welfare system, in which social policies towards younger generation are reduced, but also because of a change in family relationships (Crocetti, Rabaglietti, & Sica, 2012; Sartori, 2007). In fact, emerging adults living at home can benefit from a very supportive environment, reduced responsibilities, considerable freedom, and psychological and financial support (Scabini et al., 2006). In a qualitative study, this condition has been described by an emerging adult using the metaphor of the “mattress” to convey the “perception of the parental home as a safe place, where to rest and re-charge energy before facing ordinary, and eventually extraordinary, life events that accompany the transition to adulthood” (Crocetti & Meeus, 2014, p. 1470). Given these premises, it is not surprising that the quality of family relationships has a substantial impact on Italian emerging adults’ well-being (e.g., Guarnieri, Smorti, & Tani, 2015).

But what about the role of friends? In prior research, it has been found that Italian emerging adults can count on positive friendships and that the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood functions as a “sieve” with young people becoming more demanding and selective in choosing their friends (Crocetti & Meeus, 2014). However, although Italian emerging adults have a strong connection with their friends, their adjustment was more intertwined with relationships with family than with friends. In fact, when compared to

family, friends play a non-significant role in Italian emerging adults' life satisfaction (Crocetti & Meeus, 2014).

If, on the one hand, these findings indicate that Italian emerging adults' adjustment is more strongly related to family than to friends' relationships, on the other hand, they do not clarify the interactive effects of these two social groups. In this respect, it is of paramount importance to further examine how relationships with these two groups are at the core of emerging adults' social identity (Tajfel, 1978). As underscored by Scabini and Manzi (2011, p. 571), "family identity at the individual level may be seen as a particular social identity and implies the perception of one's family as an ingroup and the sense of identification with this group". Similar considerations can be drawn for emerging adults' identification with their friends' group. Thus, in line with advances of the social identity literature (for reviews, cf. Crocetti, Prati, Rubini, 2018; Rubini & Crocetti, 2018), it is worth unraveling the potential beneficial effects of multiple social identifications with family and friends' in-groups for individuals' well-being (e.g., Benish-Weisman et al., 2015; Greenaway, Cruwys, Haslam, & Jetten, 2016).

Regarding this, moving from a variable-centered approach, in which all individuals are considered as equal representatives of the population, to a person-centered approach, that aims to identify unique subgroups within a population and verify if each of them have a specific pattern of dynamics (Von Eye & Bogat, 2006), it would be possible to deepen the understanding of what happens when emerging adults have developed a strong identification with both family and friends or when they are highly identified with only one group. Building upon these considerations, in this study we adopted a person-centered approach (a) to identify distinct subgroups of emerging adults, based on different levels of identification with family and friends, and (b) to investigate if these subgroups show differences in their current adaptation (in terms of positive self-esteem and high life satisfaction) as well as in their future

perspectives (holding a positive view of the future seen as a time to achieve personal and interpersonal goals).

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 474 (52.7% females) Italian emerging adults aged 18–28 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 23.32$  years;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.01$ ). The sample comprises 245 university students (52.2% females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.61$  years;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.21$ ) and 229 workers (53.3% females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 25.14$  years;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.66$ ). All participants had Italian nationality. Most respondents were living with their family (64%), 18% were living in a condition of semi-autonomy (i.e., sharing an apartment with roommates for attending university courses or working and going back to their family for the weekends and holidays), 14.6% were living with a partner, and 3.4% were living alone.

University students were approached in various faculties (e.g., Communication Sciences, Economy, Educational Sciences, Engineering, Languages, Law, and Political Sciences) of a large public university located in the North-East of Italy. Workers were contacted in the same geographical area in which the faculties were located in various work settings comprising factories, shops, offices, and professional services. In this way, we obtained a heterogeneous work subsample including participants employed in a variety of work settings, ranging from low-skilled jobs to high-level professions, and with different educational backgrounds (i.e., 19.6% had a junior school diploma; 52.4% a high school diploma; and 28% a university degree). Participating university students and workers were contacted personally by a researcher, provided with information about the research, and asked for their written consent to participate in it. They completed an anonymous self-report questionnaire, including the study measures.

### Measures



***Identification with family and with friends***

These constructs were measured with a subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES; Luthanen & Crocker, 1992; for prior applications of this scale in Italian language see e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Crocetti, Rubini, Berzonsky & Meeus, 2009) that assesses the extent to which one's social group membership is important to one's identity. It consists of four items that were repeated twice, once to measure identification with family and once to tap identification with friends. Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). A sample item read: "My family/group of friends is an important reflection of who I am". Cronbach's alphas were .72 and .79 for identification with family and with friends, respectively.

***Self-esteem***

Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965; Italian validation by Prezza, Trombaccia & Armento, 1997), which contains ten items, scored on a five-point Likert type scale from 1 (completely false) to 5 (completely true). A sample item is: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities". Cronbach's alpha was .84.

***Life satisfaction***

Life satisfaction was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larnsem, & Griffin, 1985; Italian validation by Di Fabio & Busoni, 2009). It consists of five items scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). A sample item is: "I'm satisfied with my life". Cronbach's alpha was .82.

***Future perspectives***

Future perspectives were measured with a scale proposed by Rubini and Moscatelli (2001), originally developed in the Italian language. The scale assesses the extent to which participants are confident that in the future they could realize their personal (sample item: "I

consider the future as a time in which I'll be able to fully realize myself", 5 items) and interpersonal (sample item: "My projects for the future concern the possibility of having a stable and satisfying relationship", 2 items) goals. All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Cronbach's alphas were .76 and .86 for the future achievement of personal and interpersonal goals, respectively.

## Results

### Cluster Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations among all study variables are reported in Table 1. To classify participants into different groups based on their levels of identification with family and friends, we used the two-step clustering procedure suggested by Gore (2000) that combines the advantages of hierarchical and *k*-means clustering algorithms. In the first step, a hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted on the standardized scores of identification with family and with friends using Ward's method on squared Euclidian distances. In the second step, the initial cluster centers obtained in the hierarchical cluster analysis were used as non-random starting points in an iterative *k*-means clustering procedure (for similar applications of the two-step procedure see Crocetti, Luyckx, Scrignaro, & Sica, 2011; Crocetti et al., 2014; Luyckx et al., 2014). We examined the plausibility of several solutions with a different number of clusters (from 2 to 7 clusters). Each solution was compared according to four principles: theoretical meaningfulness of each cluster, parsimony, explanatory power (i.e., the cluster solution had to explain approximately 50% of the variance for each of the dimensions), and number of participants in each cluster (i.e., each group should include at least 5% of the sample). Based on these criteria, we selected a four-cluster solution.

The final clusters are displayed in Figure 1. The first cluster consisted of 144 individuals (30.4% of the sample) reporting high identification with both their family and friends. The second cluster included 140 people (29.5%) showing high identification with

family, but low identification with friends. The third cluster comprised 107 respondents (22.6%) with low identification with their family, but high identification with their friends. The fourth cluster consisted of 83 participants (17.5%), reporting low identification with both family and friends. Overall, this four-cluster solution explained 75% and 60% of the variance in identification with family and with friends, respectively. Tukey's post hoc comparisons indicated that the four clusters differed significantly from each other on both dimensions.

### **Analysis of Variance**

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in indicators of adjustment (self-esteem, life satisfaction, and personal and interpersonal future perspectives) reported by participants classified into the various identification profiles. Results indicated that the clusters had a significant multivariate effect on adjustment, Wilks' Lambda = .87;  $F(12, 1236) = 5.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ .

Results of follow-up univariate analyses (UNIANOVAs) are reported in Table 2, along with post hoc comparisons. Participants in the group showing high identification with both family and friends scored significantly higher in all four indicators compared to participants showing low identification with both groups. In addition, respondents characterized by high identification with only one of the two groups (family or friends) reported intermediate levels of adjustment, and they were not significantly different from each.

### **Sensitivity Analyses**

We conducted sensitivity analyses to test whether these effects were moderated by participants' gender, age (younger and older emerging adults), status (university students and workers), living conditions (with parents, on their own, with the partner or with other roommates), and romantic relationships (dating and non-dating). A set of MANOVAs with clusters and each of the above variables as independent factors indicated that only living

conditions, Wilk's Lambda = .87;  $F(36,1703) = 1.79$ ;  $p = .003$ ;  $\eta^2 = .03$ ) have a significant effect on both personal,  $F(36,1703) = 2.07$ ;  $p = .031$ ;  $\eta^2 = .04$ , and interpersonal future perspectives,  $F(36,1703) = 2.25$ ;  $p = .018$ ;  $\eta^2 = .04$ . The results indicated that emerging adults living alone and highly identified with only one group were less optimistic about their future perspectives. However, these findings should be taken with caution, considering that emerging adults living alone were a minority in our sample. Thus, with this only exception, we can conclude that the profile of the four clusters on adjustment indicators was largely replicated across different categories, applying similarly to males and females, younger and older emerging adults, university students and workers, as well as to dating and non-dating participants.

### Discussion

In various Mediterranean countries (Tagliabue et al., 2014), and especially in Italy (Crocetti & Tagliabue, 2016), the transition to adulthood happens within the family context (Scabini & Donati, 1988). In fact, not only Italian emerging adults continue to live with their parents often until their thirties and beyond, but they also rely on their parents as a key source of material and psychological support (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2014). For this reason, when directly compared, family relationships have a more substantial impact on life satisfaction than friendships (Crocetti & Meeus, 2014).

In this study, we took a step further to disentangle what happens when different social configurations are examined. By adopting a person-centered approach (Bergman, Magnusson, & El Khouri, 2003; Magnusson & Allen, 1983), we found that 30.4% of participants reported high levels of identification with both family and friends whereas 17.5% showed a more critical profile since they were poorly identified with both groups. Importantly, emerging adults that were highly identified with both family and friends, when compared to their peers with low levels of identification, had a more positive self-image, were more satisfied about

their current life, and they had a more positive view of their future, seen as a time in which they could realize their personal and interpersonal goals. Thus, similarly to what found in the developmental period of adolescence (Palmonari, 2011), this evidence indicates that also in the phase of emerging adulthood, when individuals have high identifications with multiple groups, they can count on a more substantial social capital. As a result, they have a more positive perception not only of their current situation but they are also more optimistic about their future perspectives. In contrast, emerging adults who are weakly identified with both their family and friends appear as a highly vulnerable group.

These results contribute to social-psychological literature by further highlighting that multiple social identifications have beneficial effects for emerging adults' well-being and adaptation to reality (Crocetti et al., 2018). In fact, a consistent corpus of evidence emphasizes that social identity contributes substantially to individuals' adjustment, a phenomenon also known as the "social cure" (e.g., Haslam et al., 2018). For instance, a meta-analysis indicated that loneliness, social isolation, or living alone were significant risk factors for mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). However, most of the available evidence comes from research with adults or older people. Thus, the current study provides novel evidence on the effects of multiple social identifications, also in the developmental period corresponding to emerging adulthood.

About half of the sample consisted of emerging adults who identified highly with only one group (29.5% reported high identification with family and 22.6% high identification with friends). Emerging adults in these two social configurations reported intermediate levels of adjustment (self-esteem, life satisfaction, and future perspectives) and, notably, they did not differ from each other. This evidence suggests that being strongly attached to one group (either family or friends) can mitigate the adverse effects of being poorly tied to the other group.

It is worth noting that the distinct profile of the four identification groups was replicated across gender and age categories, as well as for students and workers, and for those involved or not in a romantic relationship. Only a minor moderating effect of living conditions was detected but should be taken with caution since it regarded very few respondents who were living alone. Overall, this evidence suggests that, despite the specific condition on which emerging adults might be, identification with family and friends is essential for their psychosocial adjustment. Nonetheless, it would be crucial to understand further whether identification with these two groups provides support concerning specific developmental tasks. For instance, the identification with family might be more critical for financial socialization (Lanz, Sorgente, & Danes, 2019), while identification with friends is likely to be more impactful for what regards hobbies and lifestyles (Crocetti & Palmonari, 2011). Thus, a more detailed study of the match between identification with key in-groups (family and friends) and specific provisions (e.g., emotional support, material support) is needed (Scholte, van Lieshout, & van Aken, 2001)

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study should be considered in light of some limitations, which suggest future directions for research. First, because of its cross-sectional design, it is not possible to investigate how the differences reported by emerging adults with distinct social configurations unfold over time. In this respect, future longitudinal studies are needed to understand how emerging adults with different identification profiles face social transitions (e.g., to stable job positions, to parenthood) while approaching adulthood.

Second, in this study, we found meaningful differences on multiple indicators of adjustment referred to both the present situation (self-esteem and life satisfaction) as well as to future perspectives (in terms of achieving personal and interpersonal goals). However, we did not investigate whether differences on global indicators (i.e., overall self-esteem,

Rosenberg, 1965; and overall life satisfaction, Diener et al., 1985) also apply to specific domains (e.g., domain-specific self-esteem, Barbot, Safont-Mottay, & Oubrayrie-Roussel, 2019; and life satisfaction examine for specific life domains, such as education, job, family, Weber & Huebner, 2015). Considering that overall self-esteem tends to have a small variance (Palmonari & Crocetti, 2011), as also found in the current study, and that effect sizes were small or moderate, it could be possible that studying domain-specific self-esteem would provide a more nuanced understanding of how emerging adults with distinct identification profiles differ on adaptation. Thus, in future studies, it would be valuable to combine these two levels of investigation (related to present and future times), tackling both global and domain-specific indicators of adjustment, to gain a better understanding of the implications of the various configurations. This approach would help to clarify whether the two profiles characterized by high identification with only one group (family or friends) are more or less adaptive across different aspects and life domains.

### **Conclusions**

By adopting a person-centered approach, this study provided a more nuanced understanding of the adjustment of emerging adults with specific social configurations, characterized by different levels of identification with family and friends. Importantly, the findings highlighted that Italian youth with a secure connection with both groups were more satisfied with themselves and their current life and also more optimistic about their future. In addition, high identification with one group (family or friends) mitigated the adverse effects of being poorly identified with the other group. Thus, the answer to the opening question, “My dear family and friends, do I need both of you to navigate toward adulthood?”, is probably yes. Or, at least, two is better than one.

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**Table 1***Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlations for Study Variables*

Variable	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Identification with family	3.84 (0.80)	-	.28***	.33***	.12*	.19***	.20***
2. Identification with friends	3.31 (0.92)		-	.16***	.11*	.12*	.02
3. Self-esteem	3.16 (0.47)			-	.48***	.44***	.22***
4. Life satisfaction	3.26 (0.77)				-	.43***	.26***
5. Future perspectives - personal	3.67 (0.62)					-	.31***
6. Future perspectives - interpersonal	4.32 (0.78)						-

*Notes.* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 2***Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for the Adjustment Indicators based on the Four Identification Profiles*

	High identification with family and friends ( <i>n</i> = 144)	High identification with family – Low identification with friends ( <i>n</i> = 140)	Low identification with family – High identification with friends ( <i>n</i> = 107)	Low identification with family and friends ( <i>n</i> = 83)	<i>F</i> (3, 474)	$\eta^2$
Self-esteem	3.25 <sup>a</sup> (0.47)	3.10 <sup>ab</sup> (0.48)	3.16 <sup>ab</sup> (0.45)	3.07 <sup>b</sup> (0.48)	3.56 <sup>*</sup>	.02
Life satisfaction	3.52 <sup>a</sup> (0.71)	3.29 <sup>ab</sup> (0.75)	3.19 <sup>b</sup> (0.73)	2.83 <sup>c</sup> (0.75)	15.78 <sup>***</sup>	.09
Future perspectives – personal	3.79 <sup>a</sup> (0.62)	3.68 <sup>ab</sup> (0.63)	3.65 <sup>ab</sup> (0.58)	3.48 <sup>b</sup> (0.59)	4.66 <sup>**</sup>	.03
Future perspectives – interpersonal	4.52 <sup>a</sup> (0.61)	4.36 <sup>ab</sup> (0.75)	4.15 <sup>b</sup> (0.85)	4.10 <sup>b</sup> (0.89)	7.56 <sup>***</sup>	.05

Notes. <sup>\*</sup>*p* < .05, <sup>\*\*</sup>*p* < .01, <sup>\*\*\*</sup>*p* < .001. Different superscripts indicate significant differences between means (*p* < .05) on the basis of Tukey post hoc test.

**Figure 1**

*Z-Scores for Identification with Family and with Friends based on the Four Clusters*

