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# Parental Stress as a Mediator for Relationship Satisfaction and Child Well-being between Two Adult Developmental Groups

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## Introduction

In the last 15 years, a new body of research looking at the development of individuals within the age range of 18 to 25 has emerged. Fifty years ago, this developmental period was marked by what are now deemed "adult" responsibilities such as marriage and parenthood. In present times however, we have found that more and more individuals are using this period as a time to obtain an education, and form self identity. Research looking at this population has unearthed distinguishing characteristics that set them apart from other developmental groups (Arnett & Taber, 1994).

For emerging adults undergoing the transition to parenthood, the introduction of a child into that self identification process could drastically change the outcomes of that process. The transition to parenthood has been found to be a period marked by rapid identity formation and development (Delmore-Ko, 2001). The impacts on of experiencing these, and the changes associated with emerging adulthood simultaneously could significantly change developmental patterns in both domains. Indeed, individuals going through multiple developmental changes, or whom have increases in role overload, are less likely to successfully navigating the transition to parenthood (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, Sayer, 2007; Palmer, 2004).

## Present Study

An abundance of research exists on the characteristics, relationship patterns, and development of emerging adults, but little, if anything is known about how this particular developmental group differs in matters of parenting stress and child outcomes. It is likely that individuals who become parents during the emerging adulthood developmental period will differ significantly from those who become parents in later years due to principal developmental and emotional differences. It is also likely that emerging adult parents may struggle to separate relational stress from parenting stress, and this could in turn have negatively effect child outcomes.

Due to the investigative nature of this study, we do not outline specific research hypothesis, but instead outline a number of research questions we hope to be able to answer in our analysis. These questions include:

1. Does parenting stress and how it influences relational and child outcomes differ between emerging/young adults (age 18-25) and adults (25 and older)?

2. How does the relationship between parental stress, relationship stress, and child outcomes differ between these two groups?

## Measures

This study utilized Kenny's Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, 1999) as a basis for the analytic approach for the preliminary analysis. This analysis technique allows for both the control of the inherent dependency in the dataset and allows for the investigation of how actor and partner characteristics influence outcomes. Gender was used as a within-person repeated measure for all models.

Following preliminary analysis, partner parental stress was removed, and a mix regression analysis was done in response to rising concerns of the effects of multicorrelation on the results of the analysis. Two models were created, to measure the effect of parenting stress on relational and child outcomes. Model 1 looked for differences in variable outcomes between the two age groups using all participants of both populations. Model 2 looked at educated (at least some college) populations for the same variables and an interaction between relationship status and parental stress.

Age. Two age groups are specified in this study; emerging adults (individuals ages 18-25; n = 3,479) and adults (individuals age 25 and older; n = 4,203).

Parenting stress. Perceived parenting stress was determined by questions asked to mothers and fathers on their viewed parental roles. Ex: "Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be." "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent" and "I find that taking care of my child(ren) is much more work than pleasure." These items were assessed on a four point scale (1= strongly agree to 4= strongly disagree.) and averaged to create a scale assessing parental stress.

Relational outcomes. Relational status was organized into three categories, married, romantic and no relationship with marriage relationships being used as the comparison group for all the analyses. Relationship quality was assessed by asking participants "How is your relationship with the baby's mother/father?" Responses ranged from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

Child outcomes. Participants were asked to indicate if in their opinion, statements were not/never true (0), somewhat/sometimes true (1), or very/often true (2) for their child. Questions allowed interviewers to interpret parental views of child wellbeing socially (aggressiveness), and psychologically (anxiousness/depressiveness). The overall health of the focal child when that child was one year old was assessed by one item asking, "How is the child's health?" Responses ranged from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

## Participants

Our analysis is based on data from the Fragile Families data set. The data set is a stratified, multistage probability sample consisting of nearly 5000 couples who had children in major hospitals of 20 large U.S. Cities (population 200,000 or greater) between 1998 and 2000. The majority of the couples in the sample are unmarried, and over the age of 18. Education level within the sample ranges from some high school to advanced college degrees. For the purpose of this study we will be looking at two groups; parents between the age of 18-25 and parents 25 and older.

All participants were properly informed and briefed on the purpose of the research, and compensated for their time throughout the course of the study.

Parents were interviewed in 4 waves, the first one occurring shortly after the mother gave birth in the hospital, the second when the child had reached 1 year of age, the third when the child was approximately 3, and the fourth when the child was five. Except for wave 1, which was conducted in the hospital, the majority of the remaining 3 waves were conducted at participants home, and the rest over the phone. Participants were monetarily compensated. For the purpose of this study we will be looking primarily at the first three waves of the data.

## Results

### Relational Group Differences

During our preliminary analysis, mixed regression models controlling for gender and religiosity predicting relationship quality at wave two found a significant association for emerging adults between actor parenting stress and relationship quality ( $b = .627, t = .192, p < .01$ ). This relationship was not found for partner parenting stress and was not replicated for the adult subpopulation. Gender was not a significant predictor of relationship quality for emerging adults but was for adults. Adult women reported higher relationship quality than men for the adult subpopulation. However, to ensure that partner stress was not interfering with the results of the analysis in the form of multicorrelated results, it was removed so that actor parental stress could be examined more closely.

Once partner parental stress was removed, it became evident that actor parental stress was highly predictive for all variables. Variables with significant associations were the same for both age groups. Relationship status, parent stress, and race were all found to be significant in Model 1 for relationship outcomes. Model 2, which was used to look for an interaction between relationship status and parental stress, displayed similar results, but the interaction between relationship status and parent stress was not found to be significant for either age groups.

### Child Outcome Differences

Conversely, mixed regression models predicting overall child health outcomes at wave two found that a significant relationship existed between actor parental stress and child health for adults ( $b = .244, t = 2.41, p < .01$ ) in our preliminary analysis. This relationship did not exist among the emerging adult subpopulation. Gender was not a significant predictor in both the emerging adult and adult regression models. Gender interactions were explored for both developmental groups across child and relational outcomes. No gender interactions emerged suggesting that associations between parental stress and outcomes were not moderated by gender.

Again, when the partner parental stress effects were removed from the data, the effects of the mixed regression analysis were greatly changed. Without the partner parental stress, child outcome differences became the most distinguishing elements for both groups.

Model 1 found parental stress significantly predicted child outcomes for both groups, but race and relationship status were only significant in predicting child outcomes for older adults. Model 2 as well produced some interesting results. Again parent stress was significant for both groups, but race and relationship status were only significant for older adults. Also, model 2 found that for educated older adults only, the interaction between relationship status and parental stress was significant for child outcomes. The relationship was not found to be significant in any other population or group.

### Relationship Outcomes

Control Variables	Emerging Adults				Adults			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender	.16	.17	.16	.17	-.11	.17	-.11	.17
Religiosity	.00	.02	.00	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02
Race	-.21**	.07	-.21**	.07	-.20**	.06	-.20**	.06
Relationship status	-.76**	.08	-.65*	.29	-1.02**	.06	-1.11**	.19
Parent stress	.40**	.05	.41**	.05	.27**	.04	.26**	.05
Relationship status x Parent stress interaction	NA	NA	-.05	.13	NA	NA	.04	.08

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

### Child Outcomes

Control Variables	Emerging Adults				Adults			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender	.10	.10	.10	.10	-.03	.10	-.03	.10
Religiosity	.01	.01	.01	.01	.00	.01	.00	.01
Race	-.07	.04	-.07	.04	-.11**	.04	-.11**	.04
Relationship status	-.08	.05	-.06	.18	-.10**	.04	.22	.13
Parent stress	.18**	.03	.18**	.03	.10**	.03	.15**	.03
Relationship status x Parent stress interaction	NA	NA	-.01	.08	NA	NA	-.15**	.06

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Summary of Key Findings

Parenting stress across both groups was found to be the greatest predictor of relationship and child outcomes. Few differences were found between the two age groups in regards to significant variables for relationship outcomes. White individuals were found to have better relationship outcomes than non-white individuals. This trend was also found for married individuals. Compared to non married participants, married participants report better relationship outcomes and less parenting stress.

In child outcomes, only parenting stress was predictive of child health for emerging adults, while parenting stress, race, and relationship status were all found to be predictive variables for child outcomes for older adults.

## Discussion & Implications

To date, most of the research involving emerging adulthood has been conducted using samples of middle class, educated, primarily white individuals. Our results challenge the notion results of previous emerging adulthood research can be applied to all individuals of that population. While there are differences between the two groups, they are neither as extreme, or as abundant as we predicted. This suggest that many of the effects of emerging adulthood may not apply to individuals of a lower socioeconomic status.

It is also interesting to note that the two groups differ the most in child outcomes, and that emerging adults seem to have fewer variables contributing to lower child health than older adults. This could suggest a difference in parenting perspective or attitude towards life will require further investigation before it can be understood.

Although emerging adulthood has not traditionally been explored as a unique period for parenting research, results from this study suggest that emerging adult parents may be going through a different type of parenting process that may affect them in ways which are unique and different from older adults parents. These results have important implications for both the developmental and family fields.

## Limitations & Future Directions

One obvious limitation of this study is the target sample. The sample used to complete this research is a unique sample, which looks strictly at families of low socioeconomic status who live in major US cities, and so the results may not be applicable to all individuals of each developmental group.

Our preliminary research has also created new questions and avenues of focus for our project. For example, although we know that for educated older adults, the relationship between relationship status and parenting stress is significant for child outcomes, further investigation is needed to understand why this is, and to understand how it is significant. Also, analysis needs to be done with additional waves of the fragile families data to gain a better understanding of the shape of parenting stress over time, and to determine if additional differences between the two groups emerge.

Investigation into the differences in the significant variables predicting child outcomes also needs to be investigated. Future research should look at how socioeconomic status changes the transition to parenthood and general parenting experiences for different developmental groups. Also, this study does not answer the question, but rather opens the door to discover how socioeconomic status and conditions change the effects and characteristics of emerging adulthood in previously established developmental areas.