



Fás Aníos in Éirinn  
Growing Up in Ireland

Growing Up in Ireland Annual Conference 2024

# The role of personality and family relations in mental health and wellbeing among emerging adults: Analysis of Wave 4 data from the Growing up in Ireland study

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10/9/2024, Dublin, Ireland

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# Background

- Emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental period that was introduced by Jeffrey J. Arnett in his theory published in 2000
- Emerging adults are young people from 18 to 25 years of age (Arnett & Mitra, 2020)
- According to Arnett (2024), emerging adulthood has 5 normative features: *identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and possibilities/optimism*
- These features are supported by a number of studies (Arnett & Mitra, 2020)

# Background

- Emerging adulthood is also a period of changing brain development
- *Prefrontal Cortex Maturation*
  - Prefrontal cortex responsible for decision-making, impulse control, planning, and risk assessment
  - Prefrontal cortex becomes more efficient in early 20's - undergoes **synaptic pruning** (elimination of unused neural connections) and **myelination** (insulation of nerve fibers)
  - Leads to improved reasoning, better decision-making, enhanced self-control, and ability to plan.
- *Emotional Regulation*
  - Emotional control regulated by the interaction between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system (e.g. amygdala - process emotions)
  - Connection between prefrontal cortex and limbic system strengthens during emerging adulthood
  - Leading to more stable emotional responses and improved ability to manage stress.

# Background

- Bleidorn et al. (2013) based on an online sample of 884,328 young adults from 62 countries, aged 16-40, show:
  - Starting from early and up to middle adulthood there is universal personality maturation
  - More specifically: *“neuroticism tended to decrease and extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness tended to increase”* (p. 2537)
- Finding in line with Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood, supporting its feature of prolonged identity exploration.

# Mental Health & Emerging Adulthood

- Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health (McGorry et al., 2024) - focusing on individuals aged 12–25 years
- Mental health issues have a peak age of onset at 15 years with 63–75% of onsets occurring by age 25 years (as cited in McGorry et al., 2024)
- Various studies document the decline in global youth mental health (especially during and after Covid 19 pandemic)
- Commission identified various megatrends that are jeopardizing youth mental health
  - e.g. rising intergenerational inequality, unregulated social media, insecurity of employment, cultural influences and climate change

# Mental Health & Emerging Adulthood

- Mental health & psychological well-being in emerging adulthood may be influenced by:
  - Individual-level developmental changes attributed to the transition from adolescence to adulthood
  - Various environmental factors (e.g. family dynamics, peer interactions, education, employment etc.)
    - Parent-child relationship identified as a key protective/risk factor in youth mental health (e.g. Raudino et al. 2013; Zapf et al.2023)

# Aim & Methods

- **Aim:** To compare the relative importance of *personality* and *family relations* in mental health and wellbeing among emerging adults
- **Data:** GUI (Cohort '98) Wave 4
- **Method:** Hierarchical regression analyses to examine the role of five-factor model of personality traits and relationships with mothers and fathers in depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and emotional wellbeing among 20-year-olds.



# Measures

- **Outcomes:**

- *Emotional wellbeing*: Subscale of the Energy and Vitality Index
- *Depressive symptoms*: Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD-8)
- *Life satisfaction*: Single-item measure – how satisfied are you with life in general.

- **Main variables of interest:**

- *Personality traits*: Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI)
- *Relationships with mothers and fathers*: Network of Relationships Inventory

- **Controls:**

- Gender and the presence of a physical or mental health problem, illness or disability.

# Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total emotional wellbeing (0-100)	65.04	19.47
Total depression score (0-24)	4.52	4.63
Life satisfaction (1-10)	7.03	1.76
TIPI Agreeableness subscale (1-7)	4.97	1.07
TIPI Conscientious subscale (1-7)	5.21	1.19
TIPI Emotional stability subscale (1-7)	4.73	1.41
TIPI Extraversion subscale (1-7)	4.83	1.40
TIPI Openness subscale (1-7)	5.45	1.03
Father Admiration subscale (1-10)	7.94	1.85
Father Conflict subscale (1-10)	4.85	1.64
Father Intimacy subscale (1-10)	5.24	1.95
Father Unreliability subscale (1-10)	3.29	1.67
Mother Admiration subscale (1-10)	8.37	1.62
Mother Conflict subscale (1-10)	5.18	1.51
Mother Intimacy subscale (1-10)	6.25	1.99
Mother Unreliability subscale (1-10)	3.16	1.49
Gender - Females	51.9%	
Chronic health problem	15.0%	
N	4,602-5,186	

# Results

Predictors	Emotional wellbeing		Depression		Life satisfaction	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Controls</b>		.04***		.10***		.03***
Gender - female	-.085***		.127***		-.029*	
Chronic physical or MH problem, illness or disability	-.177***		.279***		-.179***	
<b>Personality Traits</b>		.22***		.23***		.17***
Agreeableness	.074***		-.006		.034*	
Conscientiousness	.084***		-.114***		.165***	
Emotional stability	.383***		-.443***		.259***	
Extraversion	.152***		-.108***		.186***	
Openness	.024		.049***		.004	
<b>Family Relations</b>		.05***		.04***		.06***
Father Admiration	.007		-.024		.081***	
Father Conflict	-.004		.007		-.021	
Father Intimacy	.098***		-.052**		.037*	
Father Unreliability	-.052**		.046**		-.042*	
Mother Admiration	.060**		-.022		.055**	
Mother Conflict	-.042**		.054***		-.025	
Mother Intimacy	.088***		-.071***		.125***	
Mother Unreliability	-.016		.056***		-.011	

Note. Gender = 0-male, 1- female; Chronic health problem = 0-no, 1-yes

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

# Summary of Results

- All models significantly predict outcomes, accounting for 37% variance in depressive symptoms, 26% in life satisfaction, and 31% in emotional wellbeing
- Personality traits more relevant than family relations
  - Emotional stability was the most important predictor
- Having an intimate and a reliable relationship with fathers is significant in all models; conflicts with fathers is not significant
- Relationship with mother is more nuanced – intimacy is significant for all outcomes, admiration was relevant to emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction, while conflict associated with depressive symptoms and emotional wellbeing.

# Conclusions

- Emerging adulthood is a period of significant change, both developmentally & environmentally
- Personality traits are more important for mental health than family relationships
- Improving youth mental health is important given how dependent societies are on the capacities and contributions of young people
- Prevention and early intervention is key
- Mental health promotion should be embedded within education systems, with an emphasis on sleep hygiene, physical activity, little alcohol and drug use, social connection, and cognitive-behavioural skills (McGoory et al. 2024)

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The dataset is accessed via the Irish Social Science Data Archive - [www.ucd.ie/issda](http://www.ucd.ie/issda). The access is enabled as part of the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 101008589, COORDINATE – COhort cOmmunity Research and Development Infrastructure Network for Access Throughout Europe. Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) is funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). It is managed by DCEDIY in association with the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Neither the CSO nor DCEDIY takes any responsibility for the views expressed or the outputs generated from these analyses.