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Plans to Combine Work and Family in Portuguese and Polish Emerging Adults: Effects of Gender and Work Experience

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2020.60.2.06

Abstract

Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental phase for planning future adult roles, such as the professional and familial role. Current research concerning plans to combine work and family roles in emerging adults enrolled in higher education has focused mainly on gender differences with few studies devoted to cross-cultural comparisons. This study aims to explore plans to combine work and family roles with a sample of 239 Portuguese and Polish emerging adults enrolled in higher education. Country comparisons revealed that Polish emerging adults present a more clear perspective on how to combine work and family in the future. Further, findings suggested that working students perceptions of being able to successfully manage work and family roles are higher when compared with those who were only students. No evidence was found for gender differences in future plans to combine work and family roles.

Key words: emerging adulthood, work and family, gender, working students

Introduction

During recent decades in modern Western industrialized countries important political, economic demographic and socio-cultural changes have occurred

which shape the contexts where transition to adulthood takes place (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014; Ranta, Dietrich, & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Shulman & Nurmi, 2010b, 2010a). The need for extended academic education and high rates of youth unemployment has introduced some special features into the transition to adulthood and this also applies to young adults enrolled in higher education. To characterize the developmental period between the end of adolescence and adult years, Arnett (2000) proposed the concept of emerging adulthood. It applies to youngsters between 18–29 years old and is defined as a period where many developmental tasks have to be undertaken. The emerging adulthood framework states that there are five characteristics that are dominant in this period: it is a phase of identity exploration processes (in work, relations and world views); it is an age of instability, an age of being self-focused, an age of feeling somewhere in-between, and emerging adults tend to present high expectations towards future possibilities in life (Arnett, 2004). As it is pointed out by Arnett (2000) most of these explorations aim to build plans for an adult life project but they are often revised. Additionally, the theory of emerging adulthood underlines the importance of socio-cultural influences (Arnett, 2007) that create distinct effects on emerging adults' expectations and plans towards their future commitment with adult roles. This trend towards postponement of adult roles has been observed both in Portugal and Poland. Emerging adults, in Portugal and Poland, have made enormous gains in education and in enrollment in higher education (OECD, 2011).

Enrollment in higher education has been found to account for the presence of de-standardization of the life course, with emerging adults not settling into long-term commitments to adult roles, but trying out different experiences and gradually making their way toward enduring choices in work and relations (Shulman & Nurmi, 2010). Transition to the labor market, even for emerging adults with higher education diplomas has been difficult due to low-paid jobs, and precarious work contracts which lead to high rates of unemployment (OECD, 2011). Moreover, due to the scarcity of jobs, emerging adults often interpolate periods of unemployment, training and even return to higher education in order to become better qualified. This leads some authors to claim that these emerging adults face “yo-yo” trajectories towards adulthood (Biggart & Walther, 2006), often supported financially by their parents or relations (Berngruber, 2017). This situation also accounts for changes in family formation plans. Marriage and parenthood are often delayed and the age at the birth of the first child, due the postponement of family plans, has been rising over time both in Portugal (Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2004; Wall, Vasconcelos, Aboim, & Cunha, 2001) and Poland (Kotowska, Józwiak, Matysiak, Baranowska, 2008).

Plans to Combine Work and Family Roles

Research about youth representation of their future lives includes, in most cases, the desire to have an active involvement in both family and professional roles (Cinamon, 2006; Peake & Harris, 2002). The benefits of planning involvement in family and professional roles are related to the positive aspects of this planning on the level of choices, regarding the moment to invest in parenthood, in reduction of the work-family conflict and in increase in satisfaction with the professional role and with life in general (Peake & Harris, 2002). However, other studies report that for college students, the anticipation of potential inter-role conflict creates negative expectations regarding the family and professional roles and makes them less motivated to invest in a family role (Cinamon, 2006; Cinamon & Rich, 2002).

Gender Differences

Gender differences regarding the anticipation of the balance between work and family roles were reported in college students, with 39% of women, compared with only 7% of men, estimating low work commitment along with medium family commitment (Friedman & Weissbrod, 2005). Other studies reported that while young men did not expect that family roles would negatively impact their careers, women showed lower career expectations and expected to interrupt work for child-rearing (Machung, 1989), presented more career ambivalence (Orange, 2003), and more often expected to interrupt, or work less, in order to take care of family responsibilities, showing their future career options are contingent on family plans (Gerson, 2002; Orange, 2003a, 2003b). Additionally, other research found that young women that planned to have a more active involvement in both professional and familiar roles tend to postpone their parenting plans until achieving a certain level of professional advancement (Beets, 2011) and tend to anticipate higher levels of work-family and family-work conflicts, when compared with men (Cinamon, 2006). Altogether these studies offer a clear view of the importance of gender in anticipation of the reconciliation of professional and family roles.

Work Experiences During Enrollment in Higher Education

Working students face the challenge of balancing their academic lives with work commitments. Curtis and Shani (2002) and Hodgson and Spours (2001) found that working students have higher self-confidence and competence in managing social relationships and financial issues compared to peers who only study. In other research, it was shown that the working group is characterized by stronger conviction to the direction which they want to follow in their lives (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, & Pollock, 2008). Considering the results identified by research on blending work and higher education the importance of having work experiences during college should be taken into account when future plans to combine work and family roles are analyzed (Hecht & McCarthy, 2010).

Methodology of Research

Participants

The participants were 239 emerging adults enrolled in higher education from two countries: Poland (N=122) and Portugal (N=117). The average age was 22.63 (SD=3.62). For Portuguese emerging adults mean (M)age=22.76 (SD=4.86) and for Polish M age=22.5 (SD=1.76). Females accounted for 80.8% of the participants, with 88.5% for the Polish sample and 72.6% for the Portuguese sample. The majority of participants were working students: 60.7% for the Portuguese sample and 45.9% for the Polish sample.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire. Information on age, gender and employment status were collected.

Plans for combining work and family roles. Weitzman and Fitzgerald's (1996) subscale for attitudes towards multiple role planning was used. The subscale is composed of five items that were translated and back translated into Polish and Portuguese. Participants were asked to rate their views regarding their plans to combine work and family using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

Procedure

Participants were accessed *via* two Higher Education Institutions – the University of Bialystok, Poland and the Polytechnic of Coimbra, Portugal. Researchers, with explicit permission from the Head of each institution addressed classes of students about the project and described what was involved in participation. The study population consisted of all students of the Faculty of Education, University of Bialystok, Poland, and Polytechnic of Coimbra, Portugal who were studying in September 2019. To participate in the study students should meet the criterion of being an emergent adult, from 18 to 29 years old. Students who agreed to participate received, by email, a link to complete an on-line questionnaire. Data was collected from students who expressed their willingness to participate in the study. Each participant gave his or her individual informed consent, given in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration, to participate voluntarily in the research and responses were anonymous. The research project was approved by the Ethics Commission. Data were collected between September 2019 and November 2019.

Results

To understand whether gender, nationality and work experience can have an influence on the plans to combine work and family among Polish and Portuguese emerging adults, a t-Student's parametric test was used. To determine the size of the effect, Cohen's d coefficient was used and the effect size interpreted as : 0.2–0.5 – small, 0.5–0.8 – average, and above 0.8 – large.

The first aim of this study was to explore whether Polish and Portuguese emerging adults enrolled in higher education differed in their plans to combine work and family roles (Table 1.).

Table 1. Combining work and family, differences by nationality

| Statement | Nationality | M | SD | T | p | d |
|----------------|-------------|------|------|--------|-----|------|
| HAVE NO PLAN | PL | 2.19 | 1.09 | -1.812 | .07 | 0.23 |
| | PT | 2.45 | 1.16 | | | |
| FEEL CONFUSION | PL | 2.38 | 1.16 | -.906 | .36 | 0.11 |
| | PT | 2.51 | 1.14 | | | |

| Statement | Nationality | M | SD | T | p | d |
|--|-------------|------|------|--------|-----|------|
| HAVE DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING THAT OTHERS ARE CERTAIN | PL | 2.48 | 1.31 | -.509 | .61 | 0.06 |
| | PT | 2.56 | 1.10 | | | |
| CANNOT MAKE UP OWN MIND | PL | 2.25 | 1.24 | -.451 | .65 | 0.05 |
| | PT | 2.32 | 1.15 | | | |
| ARE VERY CLEAR | PL | 3.57 | 1.15 | 2.641* | .00 | 0.34 |
| | PT | 3.16 | 1.20 | | | |

* $p < .01$

In the majority, plans to combine work and family responsibilities did not differ depending on the nationality of the participants (Table 1). Polish emerging adults ($M=3.57$; $SD=1.15$) differ from Portuguese emerging adults ($M=3.16$; $SD=1.20$) regarding one statement that applies “being clear how to plan to combine career and family responsibilities”; ($t(239)=2.641$; $p<0.01$). In this case, Polish emerging adults were more clear how to plan to combine career and family responsibilities than Portuguese emerging adults, with the effect size ($d=0.34$) being small.

Table 2. Combining work and family and the gender differences

| Statement | Gender* | M | SD | T | p | D |
|--|---------|------|------|--------|-----|------|
| HAVE NO PLAN | F | 2.26 | 1.09 | -1.505 | .13 | 0.23 |
| | M | 2.54 | 1.27 | | | |
| FEEL CONFUSION | F | 2.46 | 1.17 | .340 | .72 | 0.06 |
| | M | 2.39 | 1.10 | | | |
| HAVE DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING THAT OTHERS ARE CERTAIN | F | 2.51 | 1.25 | -1.179 | .85 | 0.02 |
| | M | 2.54 | 1.06 | | | |
| CANNOT MAKE UP OWN MIND | F | 2.23 | 1.19 | -1.381 | .16 | 0.22 |
| | M | 2.50 | 1.24 | | | |
| ARE VERY CLEAR | F | 3.36 | 1.16 | -1.146 | .88 | 0.02 |
| | M | 3.39 | 1.32 | | | |

*F refers to Female, M refers to Male

The plans related to combining work and family responsibilities did not differ depending on the gender of Polish and Portuguese participants (Table 2).

Table 3. Combining work and family and the work experience differences

| Statement | Status | M | SD | T | p | D |
|--|-----------------|------|------|--------|--------|------|
| HAVE NO PLAN | Student | 2.45 | 1.11 | 2.225 | .02* | 0.29 |
| | Working student | 2.12 | 1.14 | | | |
| FEEL CONFUSION | Student | 2.63 | 1.16 | 3.108 | .00** | 0.41 |
| | Working student | 2.16 | 1.09 | | | |
| HAVE DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING THAT OTHERS ARE CERTAIN | Student | 2.74 | 1.16 | 3.615 | .00*** | 0.48 |
| | Working student | 2.17 | 1.21 | | | |
| CANNOT MAKE UP OWN MIND | Student | 2.34 | 1.15 | 1.030 | .30 | 0.13 |
| | Working student | 2.18 | 1.27 | | | |
| ARE VERY CLEAR | Student | 3.12 | 1.12 | -4.171 | .00*** | 0.55 |
| | Working student | 3.76 | 1.19 | | | |

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Plans related to combining work and family responsibilities depend mostly on participants' work experience (Table 3). Emerging adults who study ($M=2.45$; $SD=1.11$) differed significantly from working students ($M=2.12$; $SD=1.14$) due to lack of knowledge how to plan for combining career and family ($t(239)=2.225$; $p<0.05$). The mean relating to concerns about the possibility of combining work and family responsibilities is higher in the group of emerging adults who are working students. Analyses also showed that emerging adults who study had significantly higher concerns than working students in imagining how to plan for combining a career and family life, although the effect size ($d=0.29$) is small. In addition, participants who study ($M=2.63$, $SD=1.16$) differed from working students ($M=2.16$, $SD=1.09$) in the level of confusion associated with figuring out how to balance career and family because of lack of knowledge about themselves and the stress involved in balancing these roles ($t(239)=3.108$; $p<0.01$). This means that those who study had a higher level of confusion associated with finding out how to balance career and family because they do not have enough knowledge about themselves and feel stressed when they imagine balancing these roles when compared with the working students, although the effect size ($d=0.41$) is small. Similarly, in the group of emerging adults who study, ($M=2.74$; $SD=1.16$) difficulty to understand how some people can be so certain about how to successfully manage career and family responsibilities was higher than in the group of working students ($M=2.17$; $SD=1.21$), ($t(239)=3.615$; $p<0.001$). Analyses showed that, in general, those who study had greater difficulties, when compared with working

students, in understanding that some people can be so certain about successful management of their own career and family responsibilities, although the effect size ($d=0.48$) is small.

Another finding showed that the mean associated with being clear how to plan for combining career and family responsibilities was higher in the group of working students ($M=3.76$; $SD=1.19$) when compared with those who study ($M=3.12$, $SD=1.12$), ($t(239)=-4.171$; $p<0.001$). This shows that emerging adults who combine work with study were more clear in planning for combining their own career and family life responsibilities, than those who only study, with an average effect size ($d=0.55$). No differences were found between the two groups in case of difficulties in making up the mind how to successfully combine their own career with having a family.

Table 4. Combining work and family by nationality and work experience

| Statement | Groups | | | | | | | | Test F P |
|--|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|
| | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | |
| HAVE NO PLAN | 2.08 | 1.10 | 2.32 | 1.08 | 2.21 | 1.25 | 2.53 | 1.12 | 2,13; .09 |
| FEEL CONFUSION | 2.29 | 1.10 | 2.48 | 1.23 | 1.86 | 1.00 | 2.72 | 1.11 | 4.70* 3<2,4gr |
| HAVE DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING THAT OTHERS ARE CERTAIN | 2.18 | 1.26 | 2.82 | 1.30 | 2.14 | 1.11 | 2.69 | 1.07 | 4,46* 1.3<2gr |
| CANNOT MAKE UP OWN MIND | 2.15 | 1.29 | 2.36 | 1.19 | 2.25 | 1.26 | 2.34 | 1.12 | 0,39; .75 |
| ARE VERY CLEAR | 3.85 | 1.14 | 3.23 | 1.09 | 3.54 | 1.31 | 3.04 | 1.14 | 6,58** 2.4<1gr |

** $p<0.001$; * $p<0.01$.

The numbers refer to the following groups: 1 – Polish working students, 2 – Polish students, 3 – Portuguese working students, 4 – Portuguese students.

To understand whether nationality and work experience differentiate plans to combine work and family among Polish and Portuguese emerging adults, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. Results showed differences between the groups, in the case of three items (Table 4). More precisely, differences between the groups were found to be significant for the item: “feeling confused because of

lack of knowledge or stress involved in balancing career and family” ($F(3, 235)=4.7$; $p<0.01$). Portuguese emerging adults who study and work were less confused in figuring out how to balance career and family than Polish and Portuguese emerging adults who only study ($p<0.05$). Additionally, groups differed on the item “experiencing difficulties to understand that other people can be so certain how to successfully manage career and family responsibilities” ($F(3, 235)=4.46$; $p<0.01$). Polish students who only study experience higher difficulties in understanding that other groups can be so certain how to successfully manage career and family responsibilities than Polish and Portuguese respondents who were working students ($p<0.01$). The third item which showed significant difference was related to being clear how to plan for combining career and family responsibilities ($F(3, 235)=6.65$; $p<0.001$). Polish working students are more clear about how to plan combining their work and family than Polish and Portuguese emerging adults who only study ($p<0.001$).

Discussion and final remarks

The present study leads to three main findings. Firstly, in general, emerging adults’ plans to combine work and family did not differ with regard to nationality. Only on one item did Polish emerging adults present a clearer perspective on how to combine career and family responsibilities in the future when compared with the Portuguese emerging adults. These results can be due to the fact that, according to Nancy (2016) during the economic crisis that both countries went through, Portuguese emerging adults felt higher levels of social exclusion when compared with Polish emerging adults. Additionally, the index of uncertainty avoidance that is defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations”, is almost twice as high in Portugal than in Poland. This may show that the fact that Polish emerging adults are less concerned about the future reconciliation of professional and family roles than the Portuguese group is culturally determined (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

Secondly, plans to combine work and family did not differ according to gender. This could be due to the fact that both male and female emerging adults are involved in a shared culture (the environment of higher education (HE) and because of that they are more prone to focus on their career and work projects while family plans tend to be devoted to later life. This result is consistent with the findings of other studies that showed that family plans are contingent to professional and career plans (Gerson, 2002; Orange, 2003).

Thirdly, plans to combine work and family differ, in general, according to working status. Working students were more clear on how to combine work and family, while those who are only students had more doubts about this planning. This result is in line with research that showed that working students have higher self-confidence than regular students (Warren, 2002) and their work experience can lead them to have a more realistic approach to their future work-family balance demands. Similarly, the research results by Luyckx and others (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Pollock, 2008) revealed that the feeling of being an adult was higher in students who were working than among other students.

This exploratory study reveals that Portuguese and Polish emerging adults enrolled in HE share common views and doubts as regards future reconciliation of work and family roles, pointing to the importance of social background and economic trends. Moreover, working while enrolled in higher education seems to be important in having more realistic plans about combining multiple roles. This is an important finding since many studies only focus on the negative aspects of work and study. The present research is not exempt from limitations. Due to the use of convenience samples and a cross-sectional design results should be treated with caution. Both studies with larger samples and with scales that more deeply address plans to combine work and family are needed.

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