

Going to college and having children: Challenges of emerging adulthood

Estudiar en la Universidad y tener hijos e hijas: Desafíos de la adultez emergente

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Background

According to data from the National Council of Education, undergraduate enrollment for 2019 reached 1,204,042 students in higher education institutions. These data reflect the broad interest that exists in pursuing both technical and professional careers among young people at a crucial stage of their life trajectory, which is emerging adulthood. Various studies have characterized this stage of life as a fundamental period in the development of individuals between 18 and 25 years, although it can extend up to 29 years. Emerging adulthood represents a stage of transitions and changes that in itself is linked to the life events that people go through. Some authors have emphasized how entering university broadly delimits the transition process of emerging adulthood. In addition, it has been noted that both higher education and parenthood appear to be parallel and convergent circumstances on many occasions. Being a university parent would imply having to face not only the obligations and responsibilities of the academic, work, personal and couple areas, but also the aspects of parenting and the respective maintenance. These circumstances could mean the emergence of associated stress and, therefore, affect their satisfaction with life and subjective well-being.

Aims

To analyze stress, subjective wellbeing (life satisfaction and affectivity) and social support in university students with and without children in northern Chile.

Method & procedures

The present research presents a retrospective, transactional and correlational design. A non-probabilistic sampling associated with the availability and voluntariness of the participants was used. The sample consisted of 625 university students aged 18 to 25 years ($M=20.6$; $S.D = 1.92$). Among the parameters for participation, it was established to be a student of a university in the north of Chile enrolled in a technical or professional career, and as a regular student at any academic level.

This study was approved by the ethics committee. The procedure considered the elaboration of invitations addressed to the leaders of the university careers participating in the research, accompanied by informed consents and summaries of the project. For data analysis, the information was organized and tabulated in the statistical analysis software SPSS v.25. To answer the study objective, binary logistic regression models were carried out to answer the research objective. To do this, three steps were followed: assessing the overall fit (evaluating whether or not the covariates incorporated in the model are significantly related to the dependent variable); contrasting the individual significance of the regression coefficients; and studying the adequacy of the model. The introduction of the variables was mostly guided by the available literature, for example, both positive affectivity and negative affectivity were introduced jointly to the model. However, it was decided to introduce the other variables individually, in order to be able to plot the variations of the model when receiving the incorporation of each variable. ORs (odds ratios), confidence intervals and explained variances were estimated.

Results & discussion

Among the main results of this study, it stands out that university students with children report higher levels of stress and positive affectivity, while no differences were observed in the other study variables. Regarding stress in university students, this could be related to the transformations of emerging adulthood, which added to the increase in academic demands and the fact of being a parent, could generate higher indicators of stress, dissatisfaction or decreased academic performance. The transitional intervals in the evolutionary development of emerging adulthood together with stressful situations in the university context can be translated into demands that exceed available resources, resulting in the emergence of associated complexities. These factors can enter into conjunction with others, for example, parenthood in the case of the university population, which could alter the chores and routines prior to becoming a parent. In the case of positive affectivity, our findings could be explained by the fact that people who deal positively with stressful situations in the context tend to have more tools for regulating their emotions and greater self-efficacy. In one study, it was found that some university students referred to aspects of stress with positive nuances, which sometimes motivated them to carry out activities or to fulfill their tasks. This could imply that by achieving the satisfaction of daily chores and activities typical of the evolutionary stage, greater positive affectivity would be generated, which would be related to higher subjective wellbeing.

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood represents a stage full of life transitions. There are different variables that affect a person's subjective wellbeing. One of these is the pursuit of higher education, a situation that can be especially considerable when paternity or maternity is added. These circumstances combined in parallel could lead to stress levels in people, affecting their subjective wellbeing. Even though being a father or mother and also a university student is a process of transformation and high complexity in terms of work, chores and tensions inherent to this role. In this case, positive affectivity seems to maintain an important role, which could favor the task of coping with these stressful and demanding circumstances.

Keywords: affectivity, Chile, life satisfaction, social support, stress, university students

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Conflict of interests: The authors declare to have no conflict of interests.



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