

## **Emotional Autonomy and Adjustment among Emerging Adults: The Moderating Role of Family Relationships**

García-Mendoza, M.C<sup>1</sup>., Parra, A<sup>1</sup> ([aparra@us.es](mailto:aparra@us.es)), Sánchez-Queija, I<sup>1</sup>., Arranz, E<sup>2</sup>.

1. Universidad de Sevilla (Spain)
2. Universidad País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

### **Abstract**

Emerging adults build their personal maturity within the family context, however, there is a lack of studies regarding the role of emotional autonomy during this stage. The aim of this study was to analyze the relationship between emotional autonomy and adjustment during emerging adulthood, bearing in mind the possible moderating role of parental support in this relationship. Data was collected from 1502 Spanish undergraduate students (903 women) aged between 18 and 29. Results indicated that emotional autonomy correlated negatively with family support and psychological well-being and positively with psychological distress. However, only when young people perceive a family context with low social support is gaining emotional distance from their parents associated with an increase in their psychological well-being. Our findings highlight the crucial role that family environment plays in well-being during young adulthood, and reveal that the effect of emotional distancing from parents on adjustment depends on the quality of the family climate. Future research should gain more in-depth knowledge of emotional autonomy during emerging adulthood, taking into account cross-cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** *emotional autonomy, family relationships, emerging adulthood, psychological well-being, psychological distress.*

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Family is perceived by emerging adults as an important source of social, economic and emotional support (Albertini, 2010; Fingerman & Yahirun, 2016; Fosco, Caruthers, & Dishion, 2012; Kins, de Mol, & Beyers, 2014; Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Moreno & Marí-Klose, 2013; Seiffge-Krenke, 2009). We also know that, in general, emerging adults report positive perceptions of their family relationships (Crocetti & Meeus, 2014; García-Mendoza, Parra, & Sánchez-Queija, 2017; Milevsky, Thudium, & Guldin, 2014), which are characterized by affection and a high degree of parental involvement (Duchesne, Ratelle, Larose, & Guay, 2007; Gomez & McLaren, 2006).

Social-emotional development in emerging adulthood has also been shown to be closely related to the quality of one's family environment. A strong parent-child relationship, with high levels of parental support, involvement and affection, has a positive impact on young people's psychological adjustment (Aquilino, 2006; Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 1999). It can thus be concluded that the quality of family relationships continues to play an essential role in personal well-being during emerging adulthood, just as it does in earlier years (Duineveld, Parker, Ryan, Ciarrochi, & Salmela-Aro, 2017; Umberson, 1992).

However, the characteristics of emerging adulthood vary across different societies (Zacarés, Serra, & Torres, 2015), and if we are truly to understand young people's transition towards adulthood, then we must take the socio-cultural context in which this transition occurs into account (Arnett, 2010; Kloep & Hendry, 2014). It is thus important to note that in Spain, family plays a key role in the lives of emerging adults. In southern and central European countries, including Spain, the family acts as the main provider of care and security for young people in the third decade of life (Bosch, 2015; Moreno & Marí-Klose, 2013) and as the main context for socialization within a familialist culture of dependence (Moreno, 2008). In Spain, the central role of the family is further enhanced by Catholicism, which has historically represented an important source of values and continues to play a significant role today. Moreover, fewer resources and relatively low levels of social expenditure (additional characteristics of countries in southern Europe), together with high unemployment rates and job insecurity (OECD, 2013), are further factors that contribute to the fact that young people in Spain continue to depend on their parents until well into their twenties

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(Gal, 2010; OECD, 2013). Again, this makes the family a fundamental context for young people's development.

As mentioned above, the existence of emerging adulthood as a period requires a delay in the acquisition of adult roles, which entails changes in family dynamics (Kins, Beyers, & Soenens, 2013). Specifically, in contrast to past decades, recent years have seen many young adults continue to live in their family home and remain economically dependent on their parents (Fingerman & Yahirun, 2016; Norona, Preddy, & Welsh, 2016). In this new context, parent-child relationships must find a new balance based on more egalitarian and symmetrical relationships between parents and their offspring (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011; Manzi, Regalia, Pelucchi, & Fincham, 2012; Parra, Oliva, & Reina, 2015).

Specifically, this new equilibrium in family relationships in the third decade of life requires a new balance to be achieved between young people's autonomy and their dependence on their parents (Aquilino, 2006; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2011). Emotional autonomy is therefore an especially important concept during these years. In the context of family relationships, autonomy has traditionally been understood as a developmental stage that occurs during adolescence and which marks a person's entrance into the adult world (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). This autonomy appears to be composed of at least three dimensions (Noom et al., 1999). The first of these is behavioral, as it refers to a young person's ability to act independently. The second is cognitive, as it implies the acquisition of a sense of competence and agency, through which an individual learns how to take control of his or her own life. Finally, the third dimension is emotional and refers to the perception of independence through self-confidence and individuality, in addition to the establishment of emotional bonds that are more symmetrical than those established during childhood. The last of these aspects, emotional autonomy, which involves individuation and the relinquishing of one's dependence on one's parents (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), has sparked a great deal of interest among researchers, to such an extent that it has generated a certain degree of controversy.

Some authors believe that emotional autonomy is a developmental task pertaining to adolescence (Allen et al., 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 2001), and a fundamental requirement for taking on adult roles (Freud, 1958). According to this theory, gaining emotional autonomy from parents is a necessary process that will have a positive effect on adolescents' adjustment and ensure their healthy development (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

However, other authors dispute the argument that achieving emotional autonomy is a developmental task, with their research supporting the theory that adolescents who feel more emotionally autonomous from their parents perceive lower quality, less affection and less love in their relationships with them (Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Zimmer-Gembeck, Madsen, & Hanisch, 2011). These studies have also shown that high levels of emotional autonomy are associated with challenges in family relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood, less cohesive family structures marked by a lack of emotional intimacy and communication, and more difficult parent-child relationships (Neff & Harter, 2003; Yu, 2011). Thus, according to this latter perspective, high emotional autonomy is associated, at least during these years, with feelings of insecurity, negative self-concept, depression and other behaviors linked to internalizing problems (Delhaye, Kempnaers, Linkowski, Stroobants, & Goossens, 2012; Ryan & Lynch, 1989).

Proponents of an even more complex theory argue that we must take other variables of the family system into account in order to understand the relationship between emotional autonomy and adjustment. Fuhrman and Holmbeck (1995) found that emotional autonomy was associated with negative adjustment in contexts of greater family support (i.e. family cohesion) and with positive adjustment in contexts of less family support. Emotional autonomy therefore predicted positive adjustment in an adolescent when the affective quality of the parent-child relationship was negative. However, Lamborn and Steinberg (1993) found emotional autonomy to be associated with both positive achievements (e.g. academic competence) and negative consequences (e.g. internal distress, behavioral problems), especially in contexts of strong family support.

Clearly, the matter of the role of emotional autonomy in family relationships during adolescence is a controversial one, and has been studied very little in emerging adulthood. One question that therefore needs to be answered is: What happens in relation to emotional autonomy during emerging adulthood?

Although research into the meaning of emotional autonomy during emerging adulthood is sparse, some studies have found that it is associated with adjustment and positive achievements in early adulthood (Frank, Pirsch, & Wright, 1990). Others, in contrast, have found that emotional autonomy is negatively associated with levels of life satisfaction among young people undergoing this phase of development (Parra, Oliva, & Sánchez-Queija, 2015).

In light of the theoretical framework outlined above, this study has two main aims: to analyze the relationship between emotional autonomy and adjustment during emerging adulthood and to explore whether parental support influences this relationship.

To achieve the first of these aims, we will analyze the relationship between emotional autonomy and a fundamental variable of family functioning during emerging adulthood: the degree of family social support perceived by young people. We will also examine the relationship between emotional autonomy, psychological well-being and psychological distress during this stage of development. We hypothesize that the emotional autonomy of emerging adults in Spain will correlate positively with psychological distress and negatively with psychological well-being and the quality of the family environment. These findings would be consistent with the results reported by previous studies carried out with both adolescents (Oliva & Parra, 2001; Parra & Oliva, 2009) and emerging adults (Parra et al., 2015) in the Spanish context.

Regarding the study's second aim, based on the findings of previous studies (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995; Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993), we expect family support to act as a moderator variable between the emotional autonomy and adjustment of young people in their twenties. However, due to contradictory results, we have no hypothesis regarding the exact nature of this moderation.

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## ***Method***

### *Participants*

The sample formed part of the project Transition to Adulthood in Spain (TAE, Transición a la Aduldez en España). It comprised 1502 emerging adults (903 women and 599 men) aged between 18 and 29 ( $M = 20.32$  and  $SD = 2.13$ ). All were studying at one of two universities in Spain, within 5 major fields of knowledge: Arts and Humanities, Science, Health Sciences, Social and Legal Sciences and Engineering and Architecture (proportionally represented in the sample).

### *Procedures*

First, faculty members from the two participating universities were contacted in order to explain the aims of the study and request permission to visit their classrooms and gather information. We also informed students of the study objectives and made it clear that participation was voluntary. Once students had agreed to take part in the study, they anonymously completed a booklet containing the study instruments in the presence of a member of the research team. This took approximately 30 minutes. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 22.0 for Windows (IBM Corp., 2013) was used for the data analysis. Responses were processed in accordance with the highest standards of privacy and scientific rigor. The study was approved by the Coordinating Committee for the Ethics of Biomedical Research in Andalusia (Spain).

### *Measures*

*Demographic variables.* All participants indicated their age, sex and field of study. *Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS)* (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). We used three subscales of the EAS (non-dependency on parents, individuation from parents and deidealization of parents), grouped into a second-order factor, emotional autonomy ( $\alpha = .74$ , for example, “My parents and I agree on everything”). The scale comprised 14 items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores on the scale denote greater emotional autonomy. The Spanish version of the scale has demonstrated concurrent and predictive validity in previous research (Oliva & Parra, 2001).

*Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)* (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). We administered the Spanish version (Landeta & Calvete, 2002) of the Family subscale ( $\alpha = .90$ ), a survey with 4 items evaluating family social support (for example, “I can talk about my problems with my family”). Values range from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*). Higher scores on the scale indicate higher levels of family social support.

*Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21)* (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). We administered the reduced Spanish version (Bados, Solanas, & Andrés, 2005), a questionnaire with 21 items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*applied to me very much, or most of the time*), which comprises 3 subscales, depression, anxiety and stress, grouped into a second-order factor, psychological distress ( $\alpha = .89$ , for example, “I felt sad and depressed”). Higher scores on the scale indicate greater psychological distress.

*Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBS)* (Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1995). We administered the reduced Spanish version of the scale (Diaz et al., 2006), a questionnaire with 29 items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*). The PWBS comprises 6 subscales: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth, which can be grouped into a second-order factor, psychological well-being ( $\alpha = .87$ ) (van Dierendonck, Díaz, Rodríguez-Carvajal, Blanco, & Moreno-Jiménez, 2008). An example of an item in the questionnaire is “When I think about it, I haven’t really improved much as a person over the years”. Higher scores on the scale indicate greater levels of psychological well-being.

### *Analytical Approach*

In order to fulfill the study’s first aim, the first step in our analysis was to include the descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables and the correlations between all variables. To address the second objective, we then conducted two hierarchical multiple regression analyses for psychological well-being and distress, jointly adding emotional autonomy and family social support followed by the interaction terms from the previous step. All variables were centered for the analyses.

The final step was to probe the significant interactions by using the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991). We used the Jose program (2013) to graph the results, and the Simple1 macro (Newsom, nd) to obtain the betas and statistical significance of the slopes). We restructured the significant regression equations to express the regression of psychological distress and psychological well-being on emotional autonomy at levels of the moderator variable.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations*

The mean level of emotional autonomy perceived by the emerging adults in our sample was 39.31 within a possible range of 19 to 55. No differences were observed in emotional autonomy in accordance with perceived family income level ( $p = .11$ ). As men and women showed similar levels of emotional autonomy ( $p = .3$ ), the results of our study are presented in terms of the overall sample, with no distinction made between the sexes.

According to the results of the correlations, emotional autonomy was negatively and significantly correlated with family social support, which indicates that the greater the emotional autonomy, the less family support was perceived. As regards the adjustment and maladjustment of emerging adults, our data revealed a significant negative correlation between emotional autonomy and psychological well-being, and a significant positive correlation between emotional autonomy and psychological distress (Table 1). In other words, the greater the emotional autonomy, the greater the maladjustment and the lower the degree of well-being among the emerging adults in our sample.

*Table 1.* Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among the study variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional autonomy	39.31	6.05	-			
2. Family social support	6.15	1.19	-.49**	-		
3. Psychological distress	31.43	21.28	.13**	-.26**	-	
4. Psychological well-being	4.58	.62	-.16**	.35**	-.46**	-

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



*Family social support as a moderator of the influence of emotional autonomy on psychological well-being and psychological distress*

The results of a hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that, when emotional autonomy and family social support were included jointly, only family social support correlated significantly with psychological well-being  $\beta = .44, p < .001$ . The regression equation also revealed a significant interaction effect between the two variables  $F(3,1484) = 73.93, p < .001, R^2 = .13$ . The observed effect size was medium-large ( $\eta^2 = .13$ ).

Regarding psychological distress, the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that only family social support,  $\beta = -.31, p < .001$ , predicted distress in the additive model. The regression equation also revealed a significant interaction effect between the two variables  $F(3,1478) = 37.77, p < .001, R^2 = .07$ . The observed effect size was medium ( $\eta^2 = .07$ ) (Table 2).

*Table 2.* Hierarchical regression analyses examining emotional autonomy and family social support as predictors of psychological well-being and psychological distress.

Variable	Psychological Well-being			Psychological Distress		
	B	SEB	$\beta$	B	SEB	$\beta$
MODEL 1: Additive						
Emotional autonomy	.00	.00	-.00	.03	.10	.01
Family social support	.18	.01	.34***	-4.52	.51	-.25***
MODEL 2: Interactive						
Emotional autonomy	.00	.00	.02	-.01	.10	-.00
Family social support	.23	.02	.44***	-5.62	.64	-.31***
Emotional autonomy x Family social support	-.01	.00	-.15***	.22	.08	.09**
$R^2$	.13			.07		

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

To interpret the interactions, we graphed the results (fig. 1 and fig. 2) following the procedure proposed by Jose (2013) and applied the Simple1 macro to test the significance associated with the betas of the slopes. In relation to psychological well-being, the slope for a high level of family social support was negative and significant ( $\beta = -.10, p = .003$ ), and the slope for a low level of family social support was positive and significant ( $\beta = .13, p = .001$ ). In contrast, the slope for a medium level of family social support was not significant ( $p = .60$ ). For psychological distress, the slope for a high level of family social support was positive and significant ( $\beta = .07, p = .05$ ), whereas the slopes for low and medium levels of family social support were not significant ( $p = .07; p = .95$  respectively). Thus, according to our results, when emerging adults perceive a high level of family social support, emotional detachment from their parents causes their psychological distress to increase and their psychological well-being to decrease. Similarly, when emerging adults perceive a low level of family social support, emotional detachment from their parents causes their psychological well-being to increase.

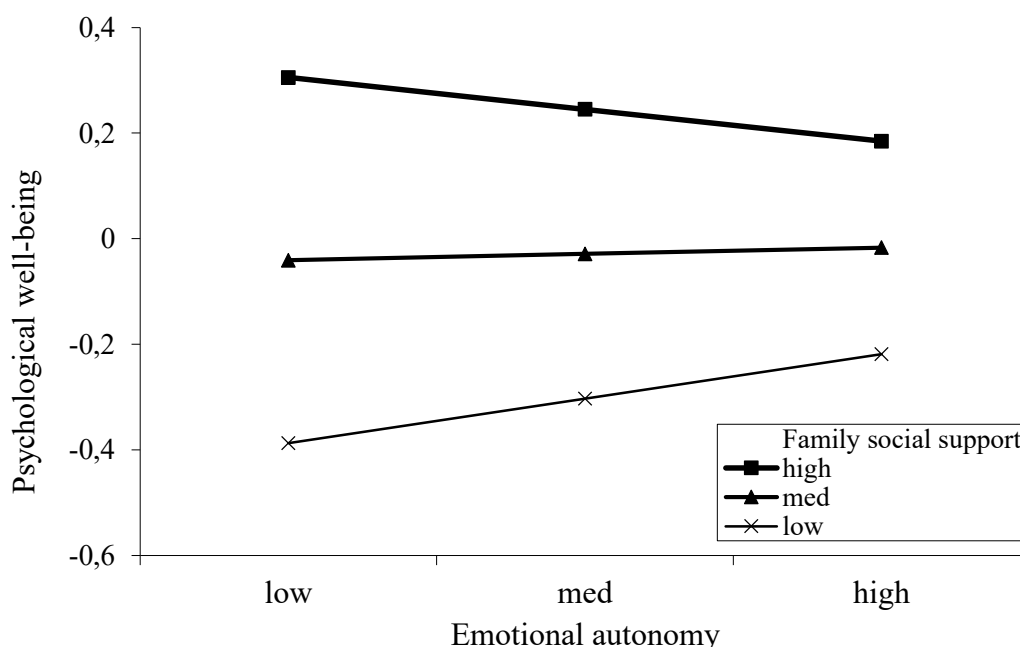


Figure 1. Moderating role of family social support on the association between emotional autonomy and psychological well-being.

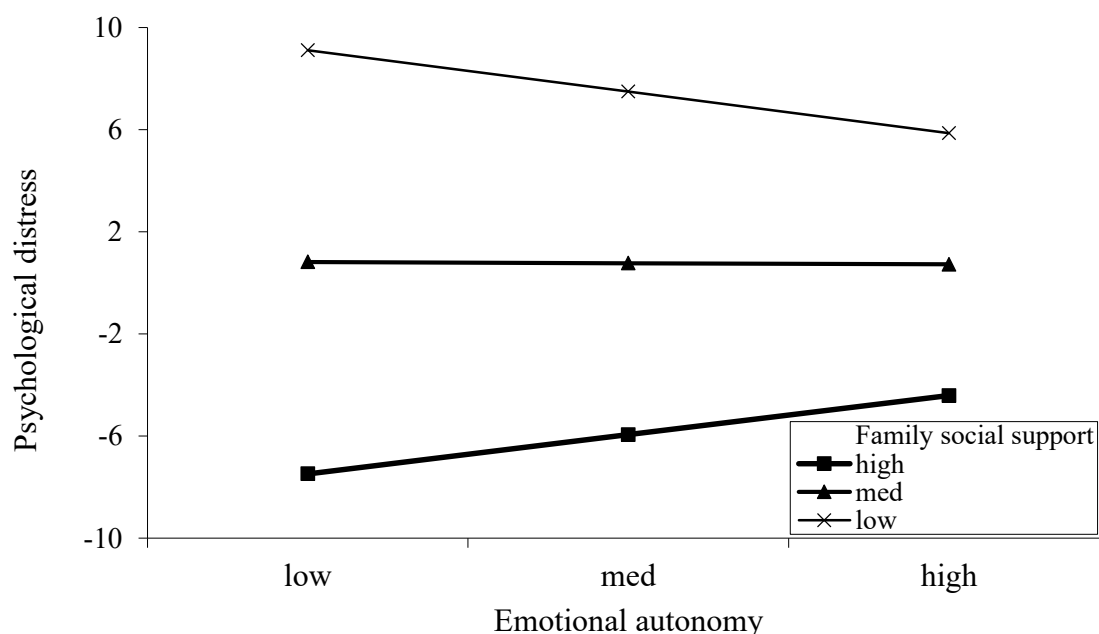


Figure 2. Moderating role of family social support on the association between emotional autonomy and psychological distress.

### Discussion

According to our results, young people's emotional autonomy is negatively correlated to the social support they perceive from their families, with emerging adults with greater emotional autonomy having less confidence in the support they receive from their parents. These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies by Neff and Harter (2003) and Yu (2011) who found an association between high levels of emotional autonomy and weaker, less cohesive family structures.

Furthermore, our results revealed that, in general, young people with greater emotional autonomy had lower levels of psychological well-being and higher levels of psychological distress. In fact, our findings are consistent with those of earlier studies, some of which were conducted in the Spanish context, in which emotional autonomy among adolescents was associated with poor psychological adjustment (Beyers & Goosens, 1999; Oliva & Parra, 2001; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Both results appear to confirm that, at least in the Spanish context, emotional detachment in a parent-child relationship is not a necessary requisite of becoming an adult, but rather a reflection of difficult family relationships.

According to Kagitcibasi (1996, 2000, 2012), in individualist cultures emotional autonomy develops through a process of individuation or affective separation within the family environment: in other words, as a result of the need for autonomy experienced by a young person who does not place particular importance on establishing close family relationships. However, the opposite may occur in more collectivist societies, such as Spain. Such cultures are based on a family model marked by strong ties (Giuliano, 2007) and therefore establishing strong bonds within the family may be a necessary step in the healthy development of sons and daughters growing up in these contexts.

Despite the fact that high levels of emotional autonomy are generally associated with poorer adjustment among young people, the present study supports the idea that we must take other variables of the family system into account in order to gain a more complete understanding of emotional autonomy (Fuhrman & Holmbeck, 1995; Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993). Indeed, in our study, perceived family support emerged as a significant moderator variable between young people's emotional autonomy and their well-being and distress. Thus, when young people perceive a family context with low social support, gaining emotional autonomy from their parents is linked to an increase in their psychological well-being. But when young people perceive high social support from their parents, emotional autonomy from them is associated with an increase in their psychological distress and a decrease in their psychological well-being. These results are consistent with those reported in a study by Fuhrman and Holmbeck (1995), in which the authors analyzed a sample of adolescents and concluded that emotional autonomy was more functional in contexts of low family support.

Our study had certain limitations. The first is the exclusive use of self-report questionnaires as a data collection method. Gathering qualitative data, for example through group interviews, would likely have provided us with more insight into the role of emotional autonomy during this period. A second limitation is the young mean age of the sample, which is only representative of younger emerging adults. It would be interesting for future research to cover the entire third decade of young people's lives. A third limitation is that our sample included only Spanish subjects. Obtaining information from young people from other cultural backgrounds would have enabled us to understand whether our conclusions regarding the meaning of emotional autonomy

and its relationship with the family environment and well-being are specific to collectivist cultures such as Spain, or if these relationships are also found in more individualist cultures. One final limitation, in our view, is that we gathered information on a single occasion. A longitudinal study would have enabled us to analyze the evolution of emotional autonomy over the entire developmental stage and determine whether it increases with age, as some studies suggest (Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), and whether any changes occur in its correlation with family environment and the adjustment and mal-adjustment of young people.

Despite these limitations, however, the present study represents an important contribution to research on emotional autonomy during emerging adulthood. This is one of very few studies carried out in a non English-speaking country and is in fact only the second one conducted in Spain on how this variable relates to other aspects of the family system and development in the third decade of life. The findings from this study highlight the crucial role that family environment plays in mental health and well-being, not only during childhood and adolescence, but also during young adulthood, and reveal that the effect of emotional autonomy from parents on adjustment depends on the quality of the family climate.

According to our results, high levels of emotional autonomy are associated with low family support, more emotional problems and less well-being. Our findings indicate that emotional autonomy is only positive in a family environment in which there is a low level of support. This makes sense: in a context in which young people do not feel that they can seek refuge in their family, having emotional autonomy improves their well-being. However, when young people perceive high support from their parents, being emotionally autonomous contributes to an increase in their distress. It is likely that in central-southern European countries such as Spain, where the transition to adulthood is very closely linked to the family context (Bosh, 2015; García-Mendoza, Parra & Sánchez-Queija, 2017; Leccardi, 2010), it is more adaptive to maintain strong family ties, even if doing so is detrimental to the possible benefits that may come with emotional autonomy.

Emerging adulthood is a new developmental stage which, for various social and economic reasons, many young people must experience within a family context

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(Choroszewicz & Wolff, 2010; Seiffge-Krenke, 2013; Stone, Berrington, & Falkingham, 2014). There is a need for more in-depth studies of family relationships during these years, and for further analysis of variables (such as emotional autonomy) which lead us to question our understanding of what have, in past decades, been considered the developmental tasks of the transition to adulthood. Such in-depth analyses should certainly include cross-cultural studies that take into account the diverse family contexts that continue to exist in our globalized world.

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