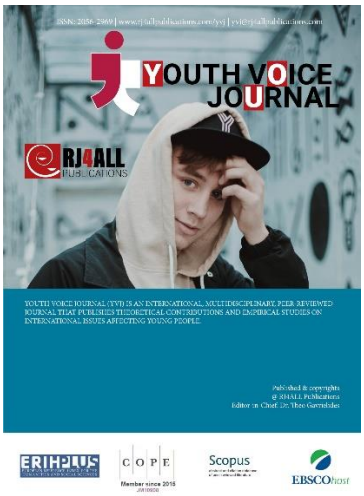

Expectations of Emerging Adults about Conjugality and Parenthood

Margarida Amaro Ferreira and Susana Costa-Ramalho

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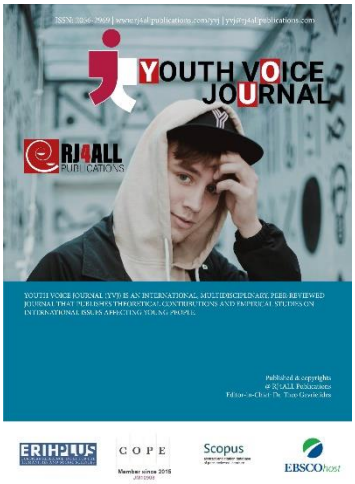

Expectations of Emerging Adults about Conjugality and Parenthood

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Margarida Amaro Ferreira[1] and Susana Costa-Ramalho[2]

Name and address of the corresponding author: Margarida Amaro Ferreira
Address: Institute of Family Sciences, Faculty of Human Sciences, Catholic University of Portugal, Palma de Cima 1649-023 Lisbon, Portugal
E-mail: margaridaferreirapsi@gmail.com

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[1]**Margarida Amaro Ferreira:** Is a Clinical Psychologist, with Post-graduation in Family Mediation and Master's degree in Family Sciences and PhD Student of Family Psychology and Family Intervention. Has professional experience in: psychotherapy; evaluation and prevention of risk situations in childhood and youth; promotion of psychosocial skills of multi-challenged families; and conflict management and mediation in interparental conflict and marital separation.

[2] **Susana Costa-Ramalho:** PhD in Educational Psychology and psychotherapist in cognitive and emotion-focused models. Clinical practice with adolescents, adults and couples since 1996. She has been a promoter and project coordinator in the area of community intervention with youths and families during several years. Currently is an Invited Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences of the Catholic University of Portugal being an integrated member at the Catholic Research Centre for Psychological, Family and Social Wellbeing (CRC-W). Her areas of research and publication are family and couple relationships, well-being and factors that promote satisfaction and balance in couples

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Abstract

In modern societies the life course up to the point of marriage and having children is not as linear as it was in the past. For this reason, this study aimed to analyse the factors that may influence the expectations of emerging adults on conjugality and parenthood, such as academic ambition, family typology, and religion. This is an exploratory research, with qualitative design, in which 18 emerging adults living in Portugal participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis suggests that emerging adults perceive personal over external factors as having greater impact on what they expect of conjugality and parenthood. The current study also highlights a general preference for marriage as opposed to cohabitation, and points to a tendency, on the part of religious emerging adults, to prefer to marry through the church. The findings of this study may contribute to better interventions in different contexts with emerging adults, and may have expanded the knowledge about what their main concerns are, regarding the constitution of a family.

Keywords: Transition to Adulthood; Emerging Adulthood; Expectations; Cohabitation; Marriage; Parenthood.

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Introduction

Following the Second Demographic Transition, there was a significant fall of death rates and, also, birth rate began to decline at different levels in some European and North American countries, leading to social changes (Lesthaeghe, 2010). During the first half of the twentieth century, most individuals life course was relatively straightforward, where they would leave the parental home to marry and then have their first child before the age of 30 years (Timmer & Stevens, 2003). However, in the second half of the century, in most Western countries (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010), changes in educational standards and the increasing participation of females in the working environment led to more broadened trajectories to adulthood. It also caused the secularization of marriage, and a delay of marriage or parenthood, being currently the mean age for marriage or having the first child above 30 years, in southern Europe (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Lesnard et al., 2016), and particularly in Portugal (INE, 2020).

According to these social transformations, but also based on Erikson's (1963) classic and cross-cutting developmental theories, Arnett (2000) proposed Emerging Adulthood as a new psychosocial phase in human development, from 18 to 29 years. Emerging Adulthood is a life stage between late adolescence and early adulthood, in which individuals are more open to developing a meaningful identity in the relational dimension, desiring a long-lasting relationship, and expecting to start a family (Arnett, 2004; Plotnick, 2007). In this period of life, individuals try to achieve autonomy but usually still depend on their parents (Arnett, 2000; Tanner, 2006) and, as a result, may postpone some of their life projects. Accordingly, Emerging Adulthood is becoming increasingly relevant in industrialized societies, which points to the importance of a growing in-depth analysis of the reasons behind trajectories up to adulthood.

Thus, the question "*What expectations do emerging adults have about conjugality and parenthood?*" served as a starting point for this study and guided the research goals. Consequently, the present study seeks to ascertain whether, when, and how these emerging adults expect to be in a conjugal relationship and to become parents, and identify the factors considered to influence their expectations of conjugality and parenthood.

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The Path to Adulthood

The search for independence and self-identity that characterizes the approach to adulthood is not a linear process: there will be rifts and approaches that interfere in the balance between the family system and the needs of the young adult (Alarcão, 2002). Emerging adults often experience the pursuit of self-identity, instability, a sense of indefiniteness, self-focus, and that they can explore a diversity of possibilities (Arnett, 2001, 2004; Tanner, 2006). Some important life events are more likely to occur during Emerging Adulthood, as they demand more autonomy, responsibility, and more physical and emotional distance from parents (Arnett, 2004; Plotnick, 2007). Examples of these so-called marks of transition are the completion of studies; full-time working positions; the achievement of financial independence; cohabitation with a partner or marriage; and parenthood (Arnett, 2001, 2004; Bell & Lee, 2006). Emerging Adulthood is a life stage unlike any other, due to the diversity of life events that may empower young people with the personal, social and financial resources (Arnett, 2001; Tanner, 2006) that will ultimately allow them to be more independent.

The Delay of Conjugality and Parenthood

Marriage has not always had the same relevance throughout history (Aboim, 2006). Initially, it emerged to ensure the perpetuation of the human species and, later on, it acquired social and economic significance (Saraceno, 2003). Up to the 1960s, the man of the family was expected to be the breadwinner and, on the other hand, the woman was required to be a very good housewife and the caregiver of the family (Zamagni & Zamagni, 2014). However, the social transformations of the twentieth century brought new ways of looking at family, and relationships and, accordingly, young adults started to expect to be parents later in life, after the acquisition of educational and professional skills (Jablonski, 2009; Machado et al., 2014). The desire to establish meaningful and stable relationships started to be combined with other individual needs (Singly, 2000).

Marriage kept its significant place (Aboim, 2006), but it began additionally to be seen as an alliance where emotional satisfaction and the quality of the relationship gained relevance (eg, Alarcão, 2002; Saraceno, 2003; Zordan et al., 2009). Consequently, changes in family configurations were observed, such as an increase of individuals living alone, single-parent families, couples living together without marriage, births outside the marriage, divorce; and a decrease in the number of children per couple (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Lesthaeghe, 2010).

The increase in cohabitation without marriage has been observed across the world since the end of the twentieth century: in the United States it has almost tripled, from 6 million in 1996 to 17

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million in 2017 (Gurrentz, 2019); in the United Kingdom, it rose from 2.7 million in 2008 to 3.4 million in 2018 (ONS, 2019); and in Portugal, the Southwestern European country where the study was performed, the figure doubled from 381 120 in 2001 to 729 832 in 2011 (the last population census - INE, 2020). Simultaneously, despite this growing tendency in cohabitation, some unmarried partners throughout the world express their ambivalence concerning cohabitation, which may have been caused by the lack of institutionalization of this type of union. The consequence is a tendency to reinforce the intentions to get married before having children (Garssen et al., 2001) or to hold a symbolic event to mark the beginning of their union (Manning et al., 2007; Manning & Smock, 2002).

Family, Academic Ambition and Religion

Some authors highlight that the typology of the family of origin influences the intentions of young adults of embarking on a conjugal relationship and that there is an intergenerational transmission of beliefs about marriage in families (de Valk & Liefbroer, 2007). Other authors highlight that, not only parents have an influence on the formation of individual thoughts about conjugal life, but also does the relationship between its members. They also emphasize the contribution of a healthy family system in the positive inclination of young people to marriage (Mushkevych et al., 2021). Previous studies suggest that individuals whose parents are married may have more positive expectations about marriage (Manning et al., 2007), unlike children with divorced parents (Dennison & Koerner, 2008), which are more receptive to a union without marriage (e.g., Manning et al., 2007; Sassler et al., 2009).

Concerning academic ambition, individuals with high expectations may consider that, an investment in the academic progression is the most effective way to become a successful adult and that, starting a family, ought to be postponed (Cherlin, 2004; Manning & Smock, 2002; Sironi et al., 2015; Willoughby, 2010). The type of union desired also correlates with the academic qualifications, e.g., young people with academic degrees tend to prefer marriage (Manning et al., 2007), unlike those without academic degrees who tend to prefer cohabitation without marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Regarding the moment to get married, females usually do it earlier than males (Arnett, 2004; INE, 2020; Willoughby, 2010) but, in general, young adults whose parents hold high academic degrees and also have high expectations regarding their children's career goals, may feel compelled to focus first on the academic course (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009), given the demands to reconcile two paths in which a great personal effort is required.

Socioeconomic family characteristics are also important, in the way that parents with good resources may assure that their children invest more in academic life, which is perceived as a way to

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become a successful adult (Türken et al., 2016). In Southern Europe, in some countries affected by the crisis, highly qualified young people emigrate to countries where they expect the knowledge they gained can be more valued (Rubio & Strecker, 2016). In lower economic contexts, young people usually go through a faster transition to adulthood, developing expectations about living with a partner without getting married (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning et al., 2007) or about having children at an earlier stage of life, not necessarily in a marriage.

Regarding religion, an important factor in youth development, Portugal has a large Catholic tradition but there is a growing trend of individuals who have no religion and who adhere to non-Catholic religious positions. There has also been a reduction in the population that declares itself Catholic. This confirms an increase in secularization and manifestations of diversity at a religious level (Teixeira, 2012). Although many emerging adults may seem to be detached from the religious institutions and their practices (Smith & Snell, 2009), religion is also a factor that plays a predominant role in young people's self-perceptions, contact with the peer group, and social development (Smith & Denton, 2005). Religion also contributes to the preparation for marriage and parenthood, given that it allows the approximation of religious young adults of a set of contexts and actions that are related to the family constitution (Witte, 2012). Young people who are involved in a religious-social network can have more frequent contact with other individuals who value parenthood and with whom they also share religious and moral values (Dayrell, 2003). According to Pearce (2002), the importance of religion within each family is related to the value of parenthood and may lead to earlier marriages. It is also correlated with the maintenance of a marriage (de Valk & Liefbroer, 2007; Mosko & Pistole, 2010). Other decisions such as cohabiting with a partner or getting divorced are, to some authors, mainly taken by non-religious individuals (Manning et al., 2007).

Method

According to the literature review and the proposed goals, an exploratory study was designed, using a qualitative and interpretative analysis of the data. Thus, this research intends to contribute to the reflection on the expectations of emerging adults regarding the constitution of a family and to investigate what factors may influence conjugal and parental projects.

Participants

Participants of this study were recruited by a convenience sampling method in Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, being all contacts initiated via professional networks that indicated possible respondents, who, after brief presentations about the research theme and aims, volunteered

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themselves and then were contacted to schedule the interviews. The pre-defined requisites to participate in this study were being Portuguese; being aged between 18 and 29 years (Emerging Adulthood – Arnett, 2000); not being married nor living with a partner; not being a parent. Additionally, as the research conducted for this study did not find studies on the Portuguese population that point to religion as a significant variable within the scope of the expectations of young people towards conjugality or parenthood, emerging adults belonging to varied religious groups participated in this study. These included Catholics, Evangelicals and Muslims. The sample consisted of 18 emerging adults, 10 females and 8 males aged between 19 and 25 years (Mean age = 21.4). The number of participants was defined upon confirmation of the diversification of their sociodemographic characteristics (Table 1) and in consideration of new themes emerging from the interviews that were deemed relevant to the research, due to their diversity (Flick, 2005).

Measures

Based on the literature review, two instruments were developed for this study. The first, the Sociodemographic Questionnaire, enabled a more specific and reliable description of the participants, given its composition of simple questions requiring closed and brief answers on the respondents and their parents (e.g., nationality, age, occupation). The second instrument was the Script of the Semi-structured Interview with open-ended questions, which enabled a selection of the themes to study and systematic treatment of data to attain a deeper reflection (Flick, 2005).

Procedure Analysis

The aims of this study consisted of understanding the importance of conjugality and parenthood to emerging adults and identifying whether, when, and in which circumstances they expect to accomplish these projects. Following some previous studies, academic ambition (Plotnick, 2007) and the prioritization of achieving financial independence (Sironi et al., 2015) were found to influence expectations of conjugality and parenthood, delaying them. Finally, it was also a goal to ascertain the factors regarded by these emerging adults to have a greater impact on their expectations, concluding prior studies that the group of peers and the family-of-origin configuration have a major impact, e.g., regarding the option for non-marital childbearing (Plotnick, 2007).

To accomplish the goals of the current study, a qualitative, cross-sectional, and exploratory approach was used, which enabled an in-depth analysis of the collected information (Flick, 2005; Silverman, 2013). A qualitative analysis is suitable for small samples (Flick, 2005), due to the possibility of testifying psychological processes in a constructivist manner, leading to closer proximity and

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interaction with the interviewees. Data were collected after the interviewees signed an Informed Consent Declaration - assuring the confidentiality of the information provided - and also authorized the audio recording of the interviews. Subsequently, the interviews were fully transcribed and analysed after a thematic codification (using *NVivo11 Pro for Windows®* software - QSR, 2015) applied in an identical way to all the participants, allowing that the data were coded through the identification of patterns in sections of narratives and classified into distinctive categories (Sassler & Cunningham, 2008). Thus, the main themes that emerged from the interviews were recorded based on their recurrence, similarity, and differentiation (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which made possible to define the mutually exclusive nuclear categories and subcategories in a hierarchical system and establish relations between them.

Results

Conjugality

All the interviewees, whether in intact families or with separated parents, reported the intention to start a life project as a couple. A general preference for marriage without prior cohabitation was also registered. In relation to religious emerging adults, most of them mentioned the intention to make their future conjugal union through a religious bond. Still, some participants also mentioned their intention to have a civil marriage or a cohabiting union. Regarding the respondents whose parents are in a religious matrimony, they also considered civil marriage and cohabiting relationships for themselves in the future. In opposition, agnostics and atheists excluded an intention of a religious marriage, and they considered to have a civil marriage but reinforced the desire to share a house with a partner, as mentioned in the example "*I want to start a family but getting married is not one of my personal goals.*" (female, 19 years) and, in general, the interviewees emphasized the importance of a union based on positive and mutual feelings.

About the desired moment to begin a conjugal life, university students and working students were found to mostly expect conjugal life to occur upon completion of their academic obligations and 'after achieving financial and professional stability' (Figure 1). Additionally, economic independence from their parents was also reported as a decisive factor to consider before starting conjugal life.

The majority of the interviewees evidenced the intention to embark on a conjugal project between their 26 and 30 years, which was similarly distributed between females and males. Those who reported preference for beginning conjugality at ages between 21 and 25 years, were only females.

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Additionally, other aspects were considered to raise a family, such as the importance of having acquired maturity (Figure 1), reported by some of the students or employees.

Regarding the meaning of conjugality, both males and females considered mostly that to establish a conjugal project 'requires commitment and responsibility' and is the possibility of 'starting a family' by 'finding someone with whom one can identify' (Figure 2). This was also valued and cherished by religious emerging adults, as expressed in the following quotation "*If I get a non-Evangelical boyfriend, he will think differently. It is very important that we can pray together.*" (female, 25 years). Conversely, negative perceptions about conjugality were less frequent in most respondents, whether from participants with together or separated parents.

Parenthood

Concerning the intention to become a parent, most participants responded affirmatively. There was also a reference to preferring to have children than to get married, e.g., "*For me, it is very important to have children, even more than getting married.*" (female, 20 years). In relation to the period in life when emerging adults intend to become parents, some referred to specific ages that were in the range between 26 and 30 years. Those who did not mention specific ages, evidenced the desire for parenthood to occur only when they would be prepared for it. There was also an emphasis on parenthood to be accomplishable 'after achieving financial and professional stability'. There were also references to the desire to have children 'after having achieved maturity': "*Having children depends a lot on your maturity, what also leads you to think about whether you have the financial capacity. Maturity is not related to age.*" (male, 23 years). Participants also valued becoming a parent 'after completing academic studies', as revealed in the following quotation by this female "*I would like to have children, but at this moment my main goal is my graduation.*" (female, 21 years).

On the meaning of parenthood, some of the categories that emerged, evidenced that participants think that parenthood leads to 'personal fulfilment and learning' and 'requires responsibility and availability'. Parenthood was also found to be an 'important and expected moment in life (Figure 3)'. Some respondents mentioned that it can exist a social pressure to become a parent, as in the following reflection "*Having children is a societal tendency. One gets to an age and starts to think about having children.*" (male, 24 years).

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Factors Perceived as Having Influence on Expectations of Conjugality and Parenthood

Most factors perceived and reported as having a major influence on expectations of conjugality and parenthood are personal or society-related, with an emphasis in the latter on the role of self-determination, within the personal factors, as may be observed in the following quotation "*My life is not defined yet, but obviously I am going to be the one to construct my future and decide what to do next.*" (female, 19 years).

The next most mentioned category was 'family', referred mainly by the Catholics, having these emerging adults highlighted that family provides unconditional support, enabling real bonds and serving as a foundation for relationships. Another societal factor that emerged as having a great influence on conjugality and parenthood expectations, was 'religion' and mainly referred by religious respondents. Some emerging adults stated that religion had importance in their lives, others referred to regularly participating in learning sessions on religion or in religious celebrations. This gave rise to questions related to the impact of religious involvement, with answers mainly from children of parents in religious or civil marriages. They reported that religiosity had a major influence on their loving relationships and that it helped them to deal with life more calmly, providing strength and learning.

Discussion

The analysis sought to focus on the main themes that emerged during the research, and the discussion of the results is structured accordingly. Regarding the category 'Conjugality', the dimensions that emerged were the desire to begin a conjugal life; the expected moment to start a conjugal life; desired forms of conjugality; and the meaning of conjugality. The question on when these emerging adults expected to embark on a conjugal project led to different responses, such as 'after achieving financial and professional stability' and 'after completing academic studies', this last one mainly by university students. Several social changes have led young people to desire to have a partner or to get married upon completion of their studies or accomplishment of financial independence (Cherlin, 2004; Manning & Smock, 2002; Sironi et al., 2015; Willoughby, 2010). Plotnick (2007) suggests that there is a tendency of young individuals with the best academic results to wish to marry and become parents at a later age. Emerging adults are aware of the extreme competitiveness in the job market and tend to spend more time investing in their academic careers and exploring various work possibilities, even though they know that during the path to autonomy they will have to remain financially dependent on their parents (Andrade, 2006; Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2004). Some of them

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emigrate and, in the case of Southern Europe, that option may be due to high unemployment rates or, instead, to attractive European programs that promote mobility (Rubio & Strecker, 2016).

The majority of the participants indicated the desire to get married between 26 and 30 years. Only females referred to ages between 21 and 25 years. In terms of average age at first marriage, the results are slightly different from the reality of Portugal, but the preference of women for getting married earlier than men is already in line with what also occurs in Portugal. In 2015 the average was 31.0 for females and 32.5 for males, compared to 2018, with 32.1 for females and 33.6 for males (INE, 2020), suggesting these life projects are being delayed. Some studies refer that women wish to get married earlier than men, which can be explained by the cultural pressure they have been exposed throughout centuries, and a family-oriented education (Arnett, 2004; Willoughby, 2010).

Concerning the type of union desired and the level of schooling, in this study, all the emerging adults who were not at university expressed the desire to marry through a religious bond. In the literature review, distinct results were found, highlighting prior research that young adults who are not in college tend to prefer cohabitation, and that academic success leads to higher expectations regarding a formal marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning et al., 2007; Manning & Smock, 2002). The family typology has also a role in terms of expectations of an official marriage. In the current study, homogeneity between participants with unmarried, separated or married parents was observed. Some studies suggest that young individuals with unmarried or separated parents tend to have lower expectations in terms of a formal marriage, and higher expectations about cohabitation, compared to children of married parents (Manning et al., 2007; Sassler et al., 2009). Family formation ideas will depend mainly on the marital models that parents pass to their children. Those ideas tend to be positive when there is a favourable family context (Mushkevych et al., 2021). Some authors have suggested that the original family structure does not influence the desire for a conjugal project, but that it does so concerning the type of union desired (Dennison & Koerner, 2008; Manning et al., 2007). Prior studies suggested that, even if parents are married, a perceived high level of conflict between them may make emerge negative perceptions of marriage (Willoughby, 2010). And, concerning single-parent families, the likelihood of future divorce of children significantly increases (Mushkevych et al., 2021).

Most of the participants of this study expressed the desire to get married without previous cohabitation, as was also observed in prior studies (de Valk & Liefbroer, 2007; Manning et al., 2007; Mosko & Pistole, 2010). The marriage postponement and the growing number of cohabiting couples with or without a posterior marriage (Manning, 2013) are mainly due to the weakening of the social

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norms that define marriage, its deinstitutionalization (Cherlin, 2004; Manning et al., 2007). In Portugal, an increasing number of celebrated ceremonies between people who have already lived together has also been noted, from 54.5% in 2015 to 58.1% in 2017 (INE, 2020), showing that young people are not rejecting marriage at all or replacing it with cohabitation as a definitive situation (Manning et al., 2007; Manning & Smock, 2002).

This study evidenced that individuals desire to have a relationship with reciprocal positive feelings in the future, and want marriage to help to achieve their happiness, pleasure, mutual understanding and companionship expectations, in agreement with Zordan et al. (2009). Still in the subcategory ‘finding someone with whom one can identify’, results evidenced that religious participants reported a need to mark their future union through a religious bond, in line with prior studies (Manning et al., 2007; Manning & Smock, 2002; Zordan et al., 2009). This highlights the willingness to find someone with whom they could share the same values and religious traditions. For religious youths, the context of religion is the main source of socialization. Thus, they may have fewer opportunities to establish contact with non-religious young adults, which somehow orientates their choices of a partner (Dayrell, 2003).

Regarding the category 'Parenthood', the dimensions that emerged were the willingness of becoming a parent; the desired moment in life to become a parent; the meaning of parenthood. Most participants want to have children but stated that it would be better to happen ‘after achieving financial and professional stability’, revealing their concerns about their socioeconomic context and that it would only be achievable at a certain moment of life. Some respondents did not mention a specific time to become parents, evidencing the desire for parenthood to occur only when they are ready for it. Others mentioned that parenthood requires other resources besides the financial, and also consider becoming parents ‘after having achieved maturity’. The majority of the respondents referred to specific ages between 26 and 30 years to become parents, which is close to what happens in Portugal, where the average age of mothers at the time of birth of the first child was 30.2 years in 2015 and increased to 30.4 years in 2018 (INE, 2020).

About the expected moment in life to become a parent, and specifically, concerning the desire to become a parent early in life, in this study, religious practice was not a significant factor. This opposes to prior findings that perceived a trend of religious families to integrate their members in a kind of social life that requires the participation of the family group - and also appeals to its importance - and leads to early marriages (Hayford & Morgan, 2008; Pearce, 2002).

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For some participants, mostly females, a parental project represents the possibility of 'personal fulfilment and learning', accordingly to Canavarro (2001), who emphasizes that females tend to feel that the establishment of a unique relationship with a child will be essential to their personal fulfilment. Some emerging adults responded that parenthood is a life project that 'requires responsibility and availability', not only concerning themselves but also to others (Andrade, 2006), to prioritize the needs of the child. In another view, some participants underlined that parenthood is an 'important and expected moment in life'. They claimed not being sure about the importance of parenthood and feeling some pressure about what society expects to happen to them, regarding this matter. Some of these youths have parenthood plans, among other factors, as it is a cultural tendency, but nowadays, they also feel freer regarding the moment they choose to become parents. The idea of having children regardless of a marital project was also mentioned, thus suggesting that some individuals do not perceive a conjugal relationship as a requirement for having children (Cherlin, 2004). In Portugal, in the year 2015, 50.7% of children were born out of matrimony, showing that the parental project may be independent of marriage and, in cases where parents did not cohabit, the number increased from 9.2% in 2010 to 16.3% in 2015 (INE, 2016). A study carried out in Portugal (Machado et al., 2014) with 3585 students with a mean age of 23.7 years found that there was a prevalence of people with parental projects (85.7%) over marital projects, whether of marriage or cohabiting (71%).

In the category 'Factors Perceived as Influencing Expectations of Conjugality and Parenthood', the majority of the emerging adults referred to the importance of 'personal factors'. This suggests that, without any external influences, they would decide on their own courses towards conjugality and parenthood. This points to the existence of a path in the transition to adulthood that can only be taken individually (Bell & Lee, 2006). Concerning external factors with influence in expectations of conjugality and parenthood, participants referred to ´family' as having more impact, and generally, family was perceived as giving unconditional support, and as being the foundation of relationships and learning. Another more frequently mentioned subcategory was 'religion', when some religious respondents emphasized their participation in religious activities, and how religion influences their expectations of conjugality and parenthood. They were questioned on whether their religious involvement had an impact on their romantic relationships, and on their life in general. Some responded that religion enables learning, serenity and strength, in line with Koenig (2009) who concluded that religion helps individuals deal with difficult life circumstances and gives a sense of power in relation to the unpredictability of life.

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Conclusions

The current study has provided an original contribution to the literature by focusing on the expectations of conjugality and parenthood in the transition to adulthood, with results evidencing a) the trend of emerging adults to postpone conjugal and parental projects; b) a general preference for marriage; c) and the intention to get married, but also an openness to a transition from cohabitation to marriage. This means that both, the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004; Manning et al., 2007) and the growing receptiveness to cohabitation, do not imply a total rejection of marriage. The increasing individualization in industrialized societies seems not to have affected the importance of conjugality or the aim of starting a family. On the contrary, individualization has made young adults more demanding in their relationships but also more flexible, due to the need to adapt to different individual projects that may begin before or during their conjugal life (Aboim, 2006).

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations: a qualitative research approach was used, therefore at this point, no conclusions as to correlations may be drawn. For this reason, given the limited size of the sample, these findings cannot be taken as representative of all emerging adults. Therefore, it would be useful to carry out additional studies with quantitative methodologies, allowing for larger samples and improving the statistical power of the research. Regarding the number of participants, it was gradually defined until there were no new topics of relevance to the research. It was necessary to make a very careful analysis of the themes that emerged, to finally decide that the theoretical saturation had been reached (Flick, 2005). Considering that the 'religion' variable was included, it could have been further explored. Its impact on family-related life projects should be studied with a broader quantitative sample.

The research was conducted in a developed and industrialized geographical area, where Emerging Adulthood has been described, but one could also have chosen to diversify the geographical origin of the participants to enrich the study, in other industrialized cities. The study could also benefit from other questions on individual socioeconomic characteristics, given that the economic crisis in Portugal may have an impact on the answers. This could allow exploring in more detail its impact on the expectations of starting a family, as marriage could be perceived as a socioeconomic transition, and help to raise awareness of social policies that could be implemented to ensure emerging adults are not limited economically in their decisions. However, the issues raised may find resonance with other emerging adults.

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Contribution to Policy and Research

Considering the study results, in practical terms would be important to create measures with institutions and companies to support families, once that there is a delay of family-related projects, many times because of the anticipation of not being able to reconcile two very demanding tasks, work and family. Concerning community resources, multidisciplinary structures located in family support centres or colleges could be created to provide family-life counselling to emerging adults. It could be an early intervention focused on their empowerment, through individual or group sessions, which could contribute to the non-postponement of life projects due to the difficulties in managing psychosocial, family, and economic resources.

There is a social concern about the postponement of conjugality and parenthood due to consequences a) for individual youths well-being (important choices they have to make); b) for their families (how do parents see emerging adults at home?); c) and for societies (decrease in birth rate or late pregnancies). It would be interesting to understand if, in longitudinal terms, the implementation of family counselling services allowed young people to feel more empowered, less in conflict with themselves and with more well-being with the choices they make. In this field of research, it also would be useful to develop longitudinal studies, to understand whether the expectations of the studied sample of emerging adults became a reality. It would also be interesting to understand which factors they consider that could have helped them decide to think about starting a family without feeling that they were giving up any other life goal.

With this study, we hope to have contributed to the enlargement of knowledge on the processes of transition to adulthood in a new and dynamic setting, such as the industrialized Western countries. Thus, on a final note, the concept of family is positively perceived by most of the emerging adults despite the trend to delay the onset of family formation, suggesting that they may be laying more solid foundations for achieving that goal.

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Table 1

Sample Description

Individual attributes		Female	Male
Age	19 - 20	5	1
	21 - 22	2	4
	23 - 25	3	3
Occupation	College student	5	4
	Working student	2	2
	Employed	2	1
	Unemployed	1	1
Religious belief	Catholic	2	2
	Evangelical	2	2
	Muslim	2	2
	Agnostic/atheist	4	2
Parents' marital situation	Civil marriage	2	1
	Religious marriage	4	4
	Separation/divorce	4	3

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Figure 1

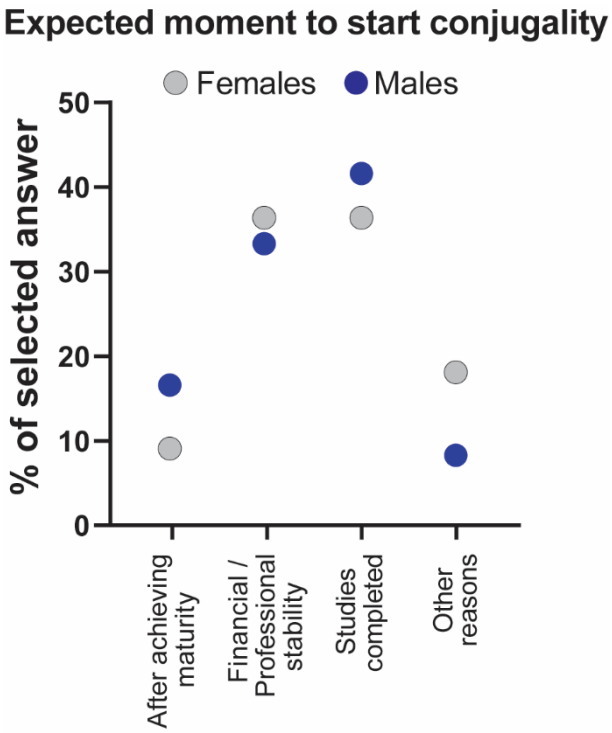

Figure 2

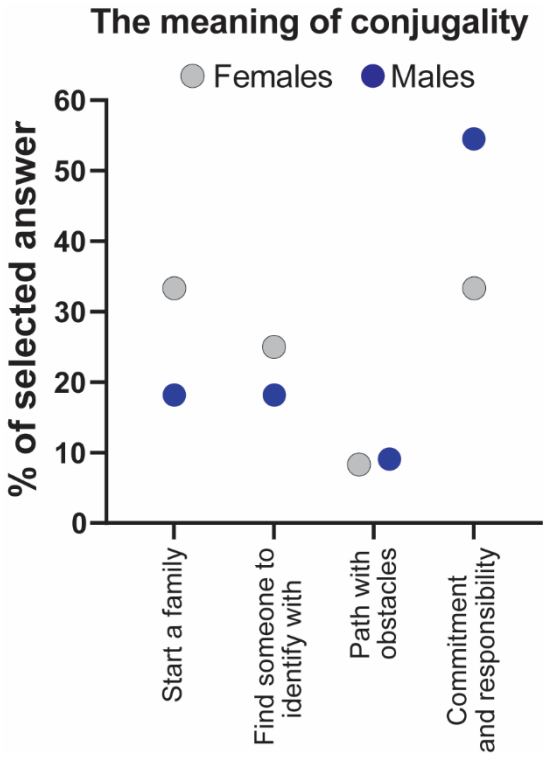

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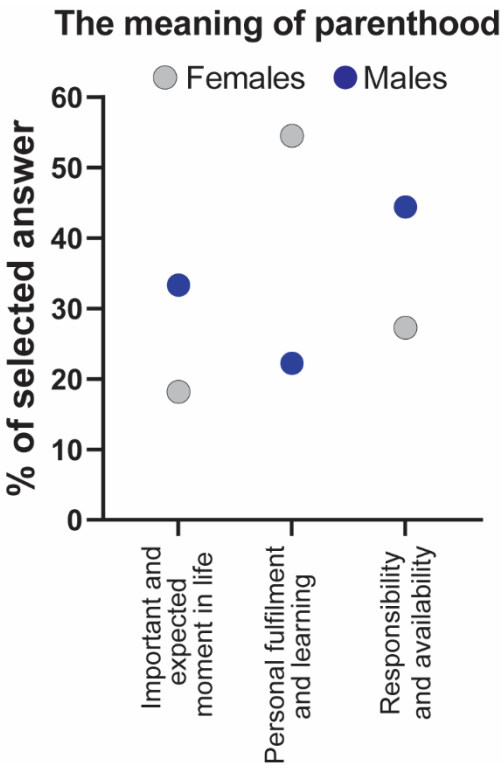
Figure 3



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