The identity function of parenthood: A systemic and developmental approach

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Received date here; revised date here; accepted date here

Abstract

The main goal of this study is to explore the processes underlying the motivation for parenthood, considering simultaneously the parenthood project (desire for becoming a parent in the near future) and the instrumentality attributed to children for significant personal goals attainment. We used a sample of 391 childless college students and confirmed the relationship between the generativity, the parenthood project, and the core personal goals sustaining personal identity. The implications for the counseling emerge from a better understanding of the parenthood function on identity construction, pointing out the relevancy of considering the life dimensions interdependence. This research was funded by the IPC – FEDER/POCTI-SFA-160-192

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Keywords: Motivation, Parenthood, Vocational Identity, Generativity, Core Goals, Personal identifiers.

1. Introduction

The decreasing birth rate in most European countries it is not a simply problem of social sustainability, but also an obstacle to personal and social welfare. In fact, the research on adolescents and young adults’ life projects shows that either the family and the work aspirations are important for self-fulfillment (Franco-Borges & Vaz-Rebelo, 2007; Amaral, 2008; Vaz-Rebelo & Franco-Borges, 2009), pointing out to the relevancy of love and work for personal development (Savickas, 1991). Therefore, the exploration of the parenthood role on life cycle can clarify its value for personal development and identity construction. Considering the individual sense of identity as a social construction through dialogue (Mcilveen & Patton, 2007), the study of family aspirations in light of the future selves can integrate this life project with the career one, expanding the question around the conciliation work-family for the personal identifiers. Indeed, the career development research supports the advantages of considering simultaneously all the significant life systems. Ritzke (2007) found a relationship between subjective adulthood (perception as being adult), romantic relationship, and parenthood, suggesting that the possibility of continuity on these roles.
transitions may be positively associated with career development. Hinkelman and Luzzo (2007) also advise for the relevancy of considering the interaction between psychosocial, vocational and career issues in counseling. Pizollarato (2007) studied the rethinking of careers by students, concluding that “(...) the joint consideration of both career goals and non career goals led to retention or revision as opposed to abandonment of the career-possible self.” (Chope, 2008, p.124).

The motivation for parenthood has been researched through two main approaches, namely studying the appeal of parenthood (precursor of the desire to be a parent), and the instrumentality or perceived value of children (Lawson, 2004). This last approach focuses on the sources of fulfillment offered by the children, through the prospective parents’ perceptions (economic value, psychological satisfaction, stability, and the establishment of social ties, and so on). The absence of motivation to become a parent has been associated with a greater importance that is given to others sources of self-fulfillment (career investment, leisure time). These studies lay on the assumption that the decision to become a parent results from an evaluation of the perceived rewards versus the costs of parenthood, but the results has been inconsistent. This inconsistency may be explained through the distinction between the outcomes valued, the will to experience them, and the experience itself, justifying the research on the psychological and demographic factors of the desire intensity to be a parent. This approach revealed that the psychological factors have a greater impact than the demographic ones, but did not explain the determinants of the fertility motivation. Lawson (2004) proposes, then, a higher-order construct of perceptions of parenting, of which the perceived value of children and the motivation for parenthood are components. This author has constructed the scale Perception of Parenting Inventory (POPI) to measure the multidimensional perceptions of parenting (Enrichment, Isolation, Commitment, Instrumental Costs, Continuity and Perceived Support). The main conclusions from the first studies with this scale were the follow ones: The childless individuals who reported an intention to become parents perceived parenting as being associated with enrichment rewards and with more available social support than did those who did not intend to become parents. Anticipated commitment associated with parenting did not relate to motivation to be a parent, suggesting that the specific costs are not influential for the motivation for parenthood. Parents and individuals childless, who intend become parents, perceive a child as adding enrichment to life and perceive parenting as less costly than did those who did not intend to become parents. The positive aspects of parenting revealed to be more predictive of attitudes and intentions than the negative aspects of parenting. Langdridge and Connolly (2005) also found that the reason that best discriminates intenders from non-intenders of becoming parents is the belief that children will bring fulfillment, equivalent to “enrichment rewards” pointed by Lawson (2004).

These studies about the antecedents of motivation for parenthood highlight the differential impact of the value that is given to parenthood outcomes, namely those related with self-fulfillment. Therefore, the subjects differed on the valued ways to reach the self-fulfillment, remaining the question about the core goals underlying these personal life projects. Which core goals sustain the parenthood project? In order to try some answers to this question, we adopted the Motivational Systems Theory approach (Ford, 1992), which considers three motivational systems (personal goals, emotions and personal agency beliefs), in interaction with the biological and environmental variables, and with the personal skills. On the other hand, the generativity (Erickson, 1963) has been a heuristically concept to study the adult development through life cycle, allowing a developmental approach of the parenthood (McKeering & Pakenham, 2000). Indeed, the generativity level has revealed to be related with the parenthood experience, with the parental practices, and with the parenthood life’s project (McAdams et al., 1992, 1993, 1998). Considering that Erikson did not specify the antecedents and derives from the generativity in the life cycle, Slater (2003) challenged the research community for this task, in order to a developmental approach of this construct related with the caring, the prosocial behavior, and the social commitment. Meanwhile, considering the multidimensional and psychosocial nature of the generativity (and its association with parental experience), it was plausible that it had an underlying role on motivation for parenthood. In fact, the generativity level revealed to be associated with the intention to become parent in the near future (Franco-Borges & Vaz-Rebelo, 2006, 2007; Vaz-Rebelo & Franco-Borges, 2009).

The main goal of this work is to present a conceptual model of the motivational processes underlying the motivation for parenthood, considering the relationships between the generativity level, the intention to become a parent, and the personal core goals. The data have implications for the counseling, pointing out different pathways trough which the personal identity is constructed and highlights the life dimensions interdependence.
2. Methodology

The sample comprises 391 college students from the University of Coimbra (Portugal), with no children, aged between 17 and 37 years old.

To evaluate the core-goals we used The Assessment of Personal Goals- APG (Ford & Nichols, 2004) - Portuguese adaptation (Franco-Borges & Vaz-Rebelo, 2008). The original instrument was adapted to Portuguese language through a previous study with 614 college students ($\alpha=.92$ for the total score). The factorial analyses maintained the original structured of six subscales, but we eliminated some items and included others in different subscales, which comprises the follow goals content: I- Affective-integrative social relationships goals; II- Agency goals; III- Self-assertive goals; IV- Generative goals; V- Creativity goals; VI- Spiritual goals.

To assess the generativity level, we used the Portuguese adaptation of the Loyola Generativity Scale - LGS (McAdams et St. Aubin, 1992) made by Vaz-Rebelo and Franco-Borges (cf. Franco-Borges & Vaz-Rebelo, 2007). This version ($\alpha=.79$) resulted from several previous psychometric studies (Franco-Borges & Vaz-Rebelo, 2006, 2007). The scale focuses on the intentions/beliefs on generativity (rather than concrete actions), and may be used at different stages of the life cycle.

To assess the parenthood project and the personal future life roles relevancy, we used a questionnaire with open questions and a modified version of Cowan and collaborators’ pie (1985).

3. Results

3.1. Project of becoming parent, life roles ‘valuation, and gender

The majority of the subjects (84.7%) express the intention of becoming parent, mainly the women compared with the men ($\chi^2 (1)=91.36; p<0.00$). The future parent’s role is more valued comparatively to the professional and to the spouse ones ($t=52.39, gl=236, p<0.001$). 55% of the subjects consider the parenthood the role worthy of further investment, being more valued by the women compared with the men ($\chi^2(2)=6.79; p=0.03$).

3.2. Reasons for the project of becoming (or not) parent

The women express more frequently the reasons for the intention of becoming or not parent. The reasons more frequent for becoming parent were the follow ones for the total sample: self-fulfillment (25.4%); to experience the parenthood role (15.9%); to love children (14.1%); to let descendants (12.9%). The reasons more frequent for the intention of not becoming parent were the follow ones: freedom restriction (4.1%); too much exigency (2.6%); not availability (2.6%). The reasons for the intention of becoming parent are statistically different according to the gender, being the women who mostly expressed the self-fulfillment ($\chi^2(1)=4.8; p=0.029$), the love for the children ($\chi^2 (1)=7.35; p=0.007$) and the wish to experience the parenthood ($\chi^2(1)=4.84; p=0.028$).

3.3. Gender, Core goals, and Generativity

The core goals vary significantly according to the gender: the women value more the affective-integrative social relationships goals ($F=29.75, p<0.000$), the agency goals ($F=17.46, p<0.000$), the generative goals ($F=12.14.75, p<0.001$) and the spiritual goals ($F=12.80, p<0.000$). The generativity level vary significantly according to the gender, being the generativity mean higher for the women ($F=7.16, p=0.008$).

3.4. Generativity and Core goals

The follow core goals are correlated very significantly and significantly with the generativity level, namely the generative goals ($r=0.202, p<0.000$), the creativity goals ($r=0.235, p<0.000$), the affective-integrative social relationships goals ($r=0.145, p<0.007$), the spiritual goals ($r=0.124, p>0.017$) and the agency goals ($r=0.110, r<0.038$). The self-assertive goals are the only ones that did not correlate with the generativity level.
3.5. Core goals, Project of becoming parent, and Generativity

The generativity level and the parenthood project are very significantly related ($F=20.94, p<0.000$). Then, the subjects who intend to become parent expressed a higher generativity level. The goals that sustain the parenthood project are the affective-integrative social relationships goals ($F=18.11, p<0.000$) and the spiritual goals ($F=6.77, p<0.01$). The others core goals do not correlate with the parenthood project.

In order to examine the relative influence of the core goals, the generativity level, and the gender over the parenthood project, we made a logistic regression considering the first three variables as predictors and the parenthood project as criteria variable. The data shows that the variables with more impact over the parenthood project are the generativity level ($G = 0.122, p <0.000$), and the affective-integrative social relationships goals ($G = 0.42, p <0.002$). The impact of the spiritual goals over the parenthood project is at the significant threshold.

4. Conclusion

According with the objective of exploring the motivational processes underlying the intention of becoming parent, the relationship among this project, the core goals, and the generativity level is the critical issue of this research. The data confirmed not only this relationship, as point out some predictors of the motivation for parenthood, namely, the generativity level, the affective-integrative social relationships goals, and, with less impact, the spiritual goals. Therefore, the intention of becoming parent lies on the personal core goals, and on personal generativity, highlighting the identity function of that life aspiration. That way, the parenthood project can to be, for some subjects, a relevant dimension of the vocational construction processes, demanding a systemic and developmental approach of all significant life projects (Savickas, 1991; McIlveen & Patton, 2007; Reitzle, 2007; Hinkelman and Luzzo, 2007; Pizollato, 2007). The why of vocational behavior, or the psychodynamic motivation (Savickas, 2005), is a crucial issue for counseling, allowing the support to all significant life systems. The data obtained in this research focuses on parenthood intentions, which will be confronted with contextual obstacles more or less demanding, originating the decision of becoming or not parent. Anyway, the relationship among the parenthood intentions, the personal generativity, and the affective-integrative social relationships goals, claims the attention for the generativity level of the contexts. The vocational counseling cannot ignore the support to an optimal balance among personal core roles, such as work and family, mainly nowadays, when the work organization pressures and constraints the vocational hope conceptualized by Diemer and Bluestein (2007).

References


