

Background

Individuals develop across the life course, with emerging adulthood (between the ages of 18-30) being an especially key phase for establishing oneself as an adult in important ways, such as becoming a parent (see Arnett, 2023; Elder, 1998). At the same time, however, the average age at which people are becoming parents has risen from about 21.4 in 1970 to 27.3 in 2021 (Matthews & Hamilton, 2002; Osterman, 2023). Examining how emerging adults think about becoming a parent is especially crucial within the cultural context of a rising average age of first birth. Qualitative methods on the transition to parenthood have previously revealed important findings, but only after the birth of a child. For example, Palkovitz et al. (2001) found that becoming a parent was an evoker of adult development. Other scholars found that parenthood involves uncertainty and struggles (Prikhidko & Swank, 2018). Research has yet to use these methods before individuals become parents, especially with the theoretical lens of emerging adulthood. **Therefore, the purpose of our study was to analyze how emerging adults conceptualize their readiness to become parents.**

Method

We used data from Wave 1 of Project READY, which included a national sample of emerging adults from the United States (n = 2931). At Wave 1, participants in the survey were asked: "When will you know you are ready to become a parent?". This was an open response question, which means that participants could type out their own response. Using this type of variable allowed us to perform a content analysis of the data.

To perform this content analysis, two coders independently read through each response to the question and coded each response accordingly. After independently reading each response and generating an initial set of codes, the coders discussed together and resolved disagreements. This process allowed us to read through the data until we reached an appropriate amount of code saturation. The initial two coders, as well as a new coder, then read through each response again and marked each response as necessary until full agreement was met.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze how emerging adults conceptualize their readiness to become parents. Our results show that emerging adults are actively thinking about when they may be ready to become parents. Although many of the participants shared little information about specifics, our content analysis demonstrates that emerging adults are often actively considering their readiness for this important family transition. Further, our results reveal that emerging adults tend to conceptualize readiness to become parents in a wide range of ways. Our study also had some limitations. For example, the sample was only from the U.S., so we cannot extrapolate these results to other populations. Additionally, although we had three coders, this type of content analysis is inherently susceptible to bias. Because of this, we do not propose that our results represent the complete list of ways in which emerging adults conceptualize this important transition. Despite these limitations, our study provides important insight into how emerging adults think about becoming parents.

Results

Overall, we found that emerging adults were generally brief in their communication on how they thought about their readiness to become a parent. Our analysis revealed that their conceptualizations could be categorized in a few different ways (see the example statements). We further found that emerging adults often discussed multiple ways in which they thought about their readiness as opposed to just focusing on one specific factor. We additionally noted that in many cases, emerging adults left some things to be rather ambiguous. For example, some emerging adults mentioned that they wanted to have "enough money" but were not specific in how much money would be considered "enough".

Taken together, the results showed that the emerging adults in our sample are mindful about when they will be ready to become parents. Although they may not have shared all their specific reasoning, we can conclude that emerging adults tend to think about readiness to become a parent in a variety of ways.

AMBIGUITY

- "I am not sure. I suppose that is one thing that I have to figure out on my own."
- "I have no idea."
- "Not sure but hopefully I will know. I don't know if anyone is ever really able to understand beforehand what being a parent entails."

STABILITY

- "Stable in all aspects of life"
- "When I can fully take care of myself and my future wife"
- "When I can support a child"

INTERNAL FACTORS

- "When my life feels like it's fallen into place, but the only gap left is the one that aches for my own children."
- "When you've decided you're ready to no longer be the most important person in your life."
- "When the time is right"

EXTERNAL FACTORS

- "When I have established my career fully...traveled and have worked with my spouse to have a nice foundation to raise a child."
- "When I have a...financially stable job, and a house for my kids to grow in."
- "Money"

NEVER

- "I will never be ready."
- "Never! Gross"
- "You'll never fully know..."

PARENTING VS. PARENTHOOD

- "When I find out I'm pregnant."
- "When I want a kid."
- "I think I will never know when I'm ready to become a parent until I actually have the baby in my arms and fall in love with the little person made by me and my other half."

READY NOW

- "I already feel like I am 😊"
- "NOW"
- "I am ready to become a parent, more or less"

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

- "When I can enjoy my own life...while in the company of whoever I am going to create the child with."
- "When I am in a healthy, committed relationship in which we both feel ready for a child..."
- "If I find a spouse who is capable of being a good, level-headed, unbiased parent"