Developmental Timetables in Adolescence and Young Adulthood: The Role of Interpersonal Ambivalence

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ABSTRACT

Growing diversity of lifestyles, increasing demands for high levels of flexibility (e.g., related to changing demands in work life), and changing values of children (e.g., declining economic relevance of children) result in social norms to become more ambiguous frames of references for planning ones' lives. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to orientate oneself and make optimal decisions. Frequently, people are torn between existing alternatives (for example regarding whether to have children), and individuals may not know how to decide on whether and when to make these transitions (developmental timetables).

The aim of this project is to develop an instrument for assessing ambivalence concerning the following decisions: whether to start an intimate relationship, whether to marry, and whether to have children. We want to explore several questions: a) How prevalent is ambivalence? b) Which factors lead to ambivalence? c) What are the correlates of ambivalence? d) How does ambivalence change over time (this will be explored in a planned panel study)? e) What are the consequences of ambivalence?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Literature shows that ambivalence concerning interpersonal relationships exists, but until now there has been no systematic research about the epidemiology, the development, and the consequences of ambivalence. In this project we conceptualize ambivalence as a characteristic of the individual. Referring to Ajzen's "Theory of Planned Behavior" we want to assess ambivalence in three aspects (see Figure 1):
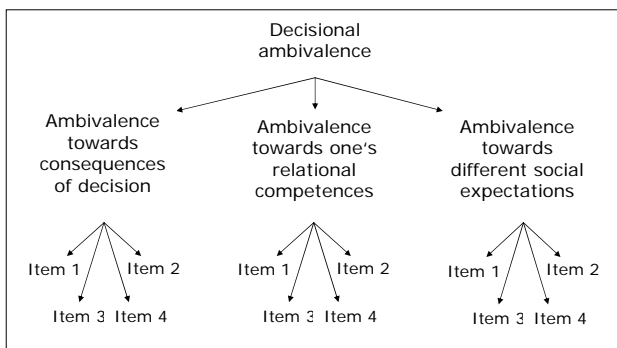

Figure 1: Interpersonal Ambivalence & its three aspects

1.) People can be ambivalent concerning the consequences of a decision (for example, whether there will be more positive or more negative consequences).

2.) People can be in conflict whether they have the competences to have a relationship or a child.

3.) People can show ambivalence towards different social expectations or norms.

METHODS

Design and Sample

First step:

Generating items based on 47 qualitative face-to-face interviews with adults (24–43 years, M=31.59 y., SD=5.66, 68% female).

Second step:

Quantitative survey on ambivalence and other variables including a sample of 224 adolescents (15-17 years, M=15.31 y., SD=0.87, 55% female) and 277 young adults (25-31 years, M=27.59 y., SD=1.70, 64% female).

RESULTS

- Satisfactory psychometrical quality of the developed instruments (Table 1).

- Expected factor structure with ambivalence as second-order factor (see Figure 1) confirmed.

- Factor structures comparable between different age groups.

- Positive correlations are found between the new direct measure of ambivalence and an indirect measure.

- Adolescents are more ambivalent than adults.

- Female adolescents are more ambivalent about starting an intimate relationship than males. Female adults are more ambivalent about getting married and having children than men.

- As expected, ambivalence is positively correlated to neuroticism and shyness.

- Ambivalence is associated with poor relationship quality and low stability of the intimate relationship.

Table 1: Internal consistencies (Cronbachs Alpha) for the developed scales

	Adolescents	Adults
Ambivalence about starting an intimate relationship		
A consequences	.61	.80
A competences	.70	.81
A social expectations	.46	.68
Ambivalence about getting married		
A consequences		.71
A competences	Not measured	.83
A social expectations		.74
Ambivalence about having children		
A consequences	.74	.80
A competences	.80	.86
A social expectations	.66	.71

Note: A=ambivalence