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Who am I? Sense of identity of Portuguese university students in a socio-ecological perspective[1]

Abstract

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The transition to adulthood, in Portugal as in most countries, has undergone profound changes in the last decades. They are mostly related to the extension of educational paths and the later and less linear entry into the labor market. Emerging adulthood (EA) resulted from a context of long school journeys, uncertain and precarious transitions to the labor market, and postponed life projects such as autonomy regarding family of origin, marriage or parenthood. One of the key features of this developmental phase is identity exploration. It involves experiencing a dynamic process of exploration and reflection in both: individual aspects and socio-ecological contexts. This study explores the self-identification of Portuguese students, based on the assumptions of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. The aim of the study was to analyse the development of an individual's sense of identity resulting from participation in the surrounding socio-cultural conditions. The surveyed psychology students (N = 107) aged between 20–25 (M = 21.4; SD = 1.44), mostly female (94.4%) provided answers to the question Who am I? using the TST (Twenty Statement Test) by Kuhn and McPartland. The collected material was analysed using qualitative content analysis with categories defined according to Bronfenbrenner's model. Results suggest that surveyed EAs defined themselves mostly according to individual features, in particular personality, character and emotional states. Surprisingly, frequently, participants identified themselves as someone who is involved in social relations above the microsystems and with nature (mesosystem categories). Identifications of mi-

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crosystem sources also seem to play an important role in the way participants described themselves, in particular as a friend and/or peer, as a family member, as a student, and as an aspiring professional. The least valued ecological systems were the exosystem (e.g. membership of an organisation) and macrosystem (e.g. nationality).

Introduction

On the one hand, identity is an actual and intriguing phenomenon, on the other, ambiguous and elusive, as it absorbs a wide range of researchers from different scientific disciplines (e.g. psychology, education, sociology or anthropology). Identity is one of the most studied phenomena in social sciences. The validity and veracity of this assumption can be confirmed by the results of the frequency of indexing the analysed term in four sample databases of abstracts and scientific texts. For example, typing the word 'identity' into Google Scholar, we find over 6 million 200 thousand results. This compares with more than 171,000 references in the Web of Science database in the forms of articles, chapters or scientific reviews. Limiting to a more current perspective (last 40 years), the term has been indexed in more than 3,500 abstracts in APA PsycInfo. In contrast, it was assigned as key issue in case of 34,000 scientific texts published after 2004 in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database.

Without any doubt, identity is an issue that is widely and deeply studied in various disciplines. However, it can be noted that analysis of the socioecological contexts of youth identity development is one of the areas that has been insufficiently analysed in social sciences and is gaining researchers' attention (Ajrouch et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2012; Żyłkiewicz-Płońska, 2023; Żyłkiewicz-Płońska i Nikitorowicz, 2017). This text provides an opportunity to extend knowledge in the area of self identification of Emerging Adults (EAs) in socio-ecological assets. Our study aims at exploring the development of identity among Portuguese EAs, exploring their self identifications according to the assumptions of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979). Particular importance was given to the socio-ecological and contextual determinants of the emerging sense of identity of researched students, taking into consideration Portuguese socioeconomic and cultural features.

EA is a phenomenon that progresses all over the world and has become more visible within the last 50 years. It manifests itself mainly in extending the peri-

od of school and training enrolment, experiencing difficulties in finding own way in the labour market, resulting in later gaining independence from the family of origin and postponing the assumption of social roles related to the area of love (e.g. marriage, parenthood). This phenomenon is also evident in Portugal, where the average age of achieving independence from the family of origin in 2021 was close to 34 years old (Eurostat, 2023b).

Presented research findings can inspire educational and preventive measures aimed at strengthening especially environmental resources that foster the construction of clear and stable identities. This may contribute to supporting a smoother and more mature way of entering adulthood by EAs.

Identity development in socio-ecological contexts

In the process of crystallising the concept of identity in social sciences, alongside the introducing role was played by psychoanalysis (Freud, 1923) followed by significant developmental concepts and theories (Erikson, 1950, 1980; Piaget, 1968). An important contribution is also due to currents associated with symbolic interactionism. The foundations for the theoretical perspective pioneered by Blumer (1969) were laid, among others, by Lewin's (1931, 1936, 1939) considerations of the role of nurture vs. nature in the upbringing of the individual and his Field Theory. The aforementioned author is one of the forerunners of introducing an ecological perspective in the development of the individual, including one's own identity. He emphasised that the identity of young people is the result of the interaction of the internal forces of the organism with the occupied living space, reference groups, as well as the broader contextual arrangement of the cultural environment (Lewin, 2014).

A researcher who continued as well as promoted the ideas related to the interdependence of identity development on the environments, places and groups in which young people live, was Bronfenbrenner. Adopting a constructivist approach of development, he formulated the basic assumptions in the Ecological Systems Model of Development (ecological model) (1979). In this model, the person functions in a system of activities, roles, relationships and settings that are all interconnected. It assumes that the individual becomes an active participant, attempting to understand and consciously construct own identity project. This happens through exploring and experiencing different groups and environments, acquiring and developing the necessary competences and resources for social functioning and constructing views and beliefs about oneself and the surrounding world.

In the analysed model, an individual takes a central position. On the one hand, a person is the recipient of the influences of particular environments and social systems, and on the other, is the stimulus that contributes to changes in environments around. The characteristics of the individual may include e.g.: name, gender, physical characteristics, personality and character traits, emotional states or possessed skills and abilities. Furthermore, the development of an individual's identity takes place in two spaces: the perspective of places and time. These spaces are expressed in terms of individual social systems: micro, meso, exo and macrosystem, and the time perspectiveis is conceptualised as a chronosystem.

The individual's immediate environment is a **microsystem** that is "… a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). Young people who are in the period of EA, developing their identity as a result of performing a variety of social roles in groups with which they have a direct contact. Examples of social roles that may be undertaken in the microsystem result from being a member of: closer or extended family (e.g. child of own parents, sibling, grandchild or cousin), peer group (e.g. friend, colleague), school/professional group (e.g. student, employee), local community (e.g. neighbour, volunteer). Experiencing face-to-face interactions enables the development of relatively durable interpersonal relationships that directly influence the formation of a sense of identity among EAs. The result of participation in the microsystem is a multiplication of the individual's sense of mainly socio-cultural identity. Adolescents perceive a wealth of assumed and fulfilled social roles as the basis for views and beliefs about themselves in social contexts.

Another system that directly influences identity development is the **mesosystem**. It "… comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates …" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). Individual's interactions and relationships with social groups, culture and nature as well as practiced interpersonal style are emphasised in the mesosystem. EAs can build their own identity project on the basis of the relationships they maintain in particular groups from microsystem and the interactions that occur between their family of origin, peer group, university environment or professional workspace. What happens in one microsystem can resonate with another, cause changes in it, thus dynamising the identity construction project, providing dilemmas that represent opportunities for its development.

As a next step, U. Bronfenbrenner distinguished the **exosystem**, which "… refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens

in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). Indirect impacts of a systemic and political nature, inhabited in the context of its potentials and limitations, as well as membership of organisations and institutions ranging from local through national to global, are reflected in the process of building own identity by EAs'.

The last, of the originally distinguished elements of the socioecology of human development, is the **macrosystem**, in which (as in the case of the exosystem) the individual does not participate directly. This system is related to indirect influences mainly of a cultural and social nature, reflected mainly in cultural norms and values, belief systems, social structures, gender role education, inter-ethnic relations, local, regional, national and international resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The space of the macrosystem mainly influences the formation of the cultural identity of young people in EA, which takes on many forms: from a sense of local-regional to national-global identity, religious or ethical identifications, beliefs and judgements built on the basis of internalised values, cultural or moral patterns.

Moreover, the process of identity formation is influenced not only by the socio-ecological contexts in which the individual is immersed, but also by the passage of time and the changes occurring in the individuals, as well as in environments, that directly or indirectly impact individuals (and one's reaction to them). Therefore, in the later work Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) further distinguished the **chronosystem**. It relates to changes and transitions over youth lifetime. These changes can be caused by historical circumstances, physical, cognitive, emotional changes of individuals with shifting social expectations. They can be predictable (resulting from e.g. developmental crises) as well as incidental (resulting from e.g. unexpected life events, such as divorce or accident). On the one hand, these changes are a source of difficulties; on the other hand, they are an opportunity for the individual's identity development. In the context of identity formation, the chronosystem should be seen as a space for EAs' insights into the past, an experiencing presence, as well as the planned and perceived future.

The development of an individual and socio-cultural identity of EAs takes place through socio-ecological immersions and self reflections. Significant others, reference groups, indirect macro-structural influences, play an important role in dynamic and constant redefinition and rebuilding identity optics by youth. Through participation in the different ecological systems, EAs experience a number of identity-building processes, such as role transitions (microsystem), norm compliance (macrosystem), developing relational maturity (micro-, mesosystem), gaining independence (individual, microsystem), which are important resources in young people transition towards adulthood.

Emerging adulthood as a period of dynamic identity formation

Based on an extensive literature review in the fields of psychology, sociology and antropology as well as research, Arnett proposed that the time between the late teens through the mid twenties (with the main focus on the age 18–25) can be considered as a separate period, which he called "Emerging Adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). Moreover, later he distinguished five characteristic features of this period, which include: identity exploration, instability, self-focused, feeling in between and possibilities/optimism (Arnett, 2004). Due to the aim of this paper, further analyses mainly focus on in-depth reflections around one of these features, which is identity exploration.

The project of constructing one's own identity is related to experiencing a dynamic process that incorporates exploration and reflection. It takes place in a variety of socio-ecological contexts as well as concerns individual aspects. In socio-ecological contexts, EAs undertake and experiment with new roles, mainly concerning love, friendship, education and work. In the individual aspect, young people mainly experience shaping and specifying their own goals, worldviews, beliefs and values, which result from participation in multiplicity of socio-ecological systems. The results of accumulated experiences and further made reflections, contribute to the construction of a more clear and definite identity. Becoming aware of one's own identity, in the individual dimension, is linked to a progressive process of understanding who one actually is, what resources and limitations it has, clarifying what is relevant and what is not. In socio-ecological dimension, there are existing relationships that one has to others, to the social world and culture, which constitutes identity.

Concept of identity development in EA is historically and culturally based. Reaching its origins, more than 70 years ago, Erikson (1950) introduced and popularised the term 'identity' in social sciences, while attributing its developmental 'crisis' to the period of adolescence. Over time, the trend towards postponing or even abandoning major role transitions in this developmental period became increasingly evident. Undoubtedly, the search for the answer to the question "Who am I?" may begin in adolescence, but it is in the EA that one is confronted with resolving the identity crisis that is the result of enduring choices in love, work and worldviews. Therefore, currently, a growing number of authors indicate that identity exploration takes place mainly in the period of EA (Arnett, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2016). This thesis is supported by the exemplary findings of the Clark Univerity Poll of Emerging Adults (2012), in which 77% of respondents agreed with the statement that the EA period "… is a time of life for finding out who I really am" (Arnett, 2014, p. 158).

Moreover, EA is a cultural phenomenon that progresses globally. Over the last 50 years, trends related to strengthening EA as a developmental phase are becoming more and more visible. It can be exemplified by gradually increasing school enrollment in secondary as well as tertiary education in both high, middle and low economic level countries (UNESCO Insitute for Statistics, 2023). This contributes to extending the period when young people stay in the education and training sector. Another trend can be observed in the case of postponing by EAs the decision of undertaking major social roles concerning love. Over the last 20 years, in the vast majority of countries, the mean age at first marriage has been increasing for both, female (UNECE, 2020a) and male (UNECE, 2020b). Similarly, the age at which women decide to have their first child is gradually increasing (UNECE, 2021). Despite the fact that EA is becoming a global phenomenon, in its nuances it varies from society to society and culture to culture. Arnett points out that the EA phenomenon exists nowadays across developed countries and is growing in developing countries all over the world (Arnett, 2011). In societies that are highly industrialised or post-industrial, where there is a demand for information-based professions, it favours extending the period of acquiring high levels of education and training. This contributes to postponing of undertaking other social roles important in this developmental period and then directly affect the dimensions and quality of the EAs' constructed identity project. In Europe, a number of significant differences were noticed between (East, West, South and North) in key areas for the EA period (e.g. living with parents, unemployment rates, having "a gap year" between secondary and tertiary education (Douglass, 2005, 2007). Comparatively, forms of identity project construction during the EA period are considered more individualistic in the West than in the East, where there is a strong commitment to the tradition of collectivism and family obligation (Nelson & Chen, 2007; Seiter & Nelson, 2011; Zhong & Arnett, 2014). As indicated by Baumeister and Muraven (1996), in modern Western society, individual exploration towards self actualization is a "moral imperative" (p. 410).

Emerging adulthood in Portugal

The transition to adulthood in Portugal has undergone profound changes in the last decades mostly related to the extension of educational paths and the later and less linear entry into the labor market. Within a context of long school journeys and slow, uncertain and precarious transitions to the labor market, the family of origin constitutes the main (and often only) support network for young people in

the process of transition. Portugal is considered a country with a "family welfare" system (Oliveira et al., 2018), which is also typical of other southern European countries. Thus, in a context characterised by weak state support and a lack of policies to support young people's transitions, the process of transition to adulthood is essentially supported by the family of origin, which tends to perceive it as a "joint undertaking" between parents and children (Andrade, 2010; Mendonça & Fontaine, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2018; Scabini et al., 2006).

Over the last 50 years, Portuguese political options have supported the widespread extension of education and the widening university participation of different social groups. Academic degrees are loaded with expectations of an easier entry into the job market, with better salary and prestige, compared to peers without these credentials. In Portugal, in 2022, 47.5% of young people aging from 24 to 30 held a university degree (Eurostat, 2022). In spite of the successive increasing on academic qualifications, the youth (20–24 years old) unemployment rate was around 22% in 2021 (Eurostat, 2023a). As a consequence, most EAs do not have enough stability to afford independent housing, and postpone leaving the parental home. According to the latest data, the emancipation age was 33.6 in Portugal in 2021 (Eurostat, 2023b). Consequently, the marriage and parenthood are also delayed: mean age at first marriage was 34 (Eurostat, 2023c) and the mean age at the birth of first child was 31.8 in 2021 (Eurostat, 2023d).

Method

Participants

Participants were 107 Portuguese students (101 females, 6 males) in EA (aged 20–25 years). The mean age was 21.4 ($SD = 1.44$). The respondents were from the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences at the University of Porto (northern Portugal). Students attended the 3rd year of the undergraduation on Psychology.

Instrument

The research was conducted using the Twenty Statements Test (TST) by Kuhn and McPartland (1954), within the original instruction: "There are twenty numbered blanks on the page below. Please write twenty answers to the simple question 'Who am I?' in the blanks. Just give twenty different answers to this question. Answer as if you were giving the answers to yourself, not to somebody else. Write the answers in the order that they occur to you. Don't worry about logic or 'importance.' Go along fairly fast, for time is limited."

Design and procedure

The aim of the study was to diagnose the sense of identity of Portuguese EAs (psychology students) based on the assumptions of the ecological model by Bronfenbrenner. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as the fact that the results obtained would only be used for scientific purposes. This was a descriptive and diagnostic study through a survey type research with the test described above. The research was conducted using Google Forms in 2022/2023. In analysing a collected research data, a holistic content analysis of self-definition (Cybal-Michalska, 2006; Leppert, 2002) was applied, based on the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner taking into account the systems in which the individual participates in shaping own sense of identity.

Research results

Due to the research tool that was used, the presentation of the collected results is concerned with the analysis of the sense of identity, interchangeably understood as a self identification. As Kłoskowska (2005) claimed, sense of identity is a narrower category than identity, it may undergo radical changes, expressing itself in the form of a direct declaration in response to a directly posed question.

Below, there are presented the identifications of the surveyed Portuguese EAs that appeared most frequently in the first three answers using a socio-ecological perspective.

Table 1

Self identification of surveyed students from particular systems in the first three answers to the question 'Who are you'?

Dimensions of the sense of identity	1st answer		2nd answer		3rd answer		Total	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Individual	86	80.4	81	75.8	83	77.7	250	77.9
Microsystem	7	6.5	9	8.4	10	9.3	26	8.1
Mesosystem	11	10.3	9	8.4	9	8.4	29	9
Exosystem	–	–	1	0.9	1	0.9	2	0.6
Macrosystem	3	2.8	7	6.5	4	3.7	14	4.4
Total	107	100	107	100	107	100	321	100

Regarding self identification, results suggest (Table 1) that Portuguese EAs describe themselves mostly referring to their individual features. In all three first answers, this dimension appeared most frequently (particularly often in the first indication) and accounted for more than three quarters of all responses given by participants. Unexpectedly, the mesosystem assumes to play a slightly more important role than the microsystem for our respondents' identity construction project. Its importance in the process of identity development was indicated by every 10th respondent (11 students in the first answer, 9 students in the second and third answer). The Portuguese EAs indicated that interrelationships between microsystems, expressed especially in the form of social relations they have and maintain, are particularly important for them. Under the assumption of conducting the research in a familistic society such as Portugal, it was surprising to see that the microsystem appeared only as a third most important component in the constructed sense of participants' identity. Its frequency increased with the order of the given answers (from 7 in the first indication to 10 in the third indication). Macrosystem subcategories are less referred to by our participants (from 7 in second answer to 3 in the first answer), but appear to be more important than exosystem references, which appear only incidentally in the second and third indications.

In the area related to the individual, for the first three answers (Table 2), personality and character is the most cited category. It accounts for less than half (43.2%) of all answers given by our respondents. In particular, those associated with introversion (e.g. sensitive, shy, hardworking) and extroversion (friendly, creative, impulsive) are mentioned most frequently. Emotional states (mostly happy, stressed and sad) are the second category, particularly important in the first three given answers by researched Portuguese EAs. Thirdly, more frequently mentioned with each subsequent answer, skills emerge as an important category (6.5%). Skills that are listed are those which are socially valued in general, but particularly in this specific life stage and/or generation such as being organised and focused, skillful in time management and expressing oneself with ease. Interests are also important for the self description of Portuguese participants (2.8%) and concern such areas as sport, music, film and dance. Less important categories are those related with being human, age or the name, which were indicated by less than five respondents.

Table 2

Categories used by Portuguese students in the first three answers to the question 'Who are you'?

Cathegories	1st answer		2nd answer		3rd answer		Total	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
INDIVIDUAL								
physical charac-teristics	3	2.8	1	0.9	3	2.8	7	2.2
personality and character	45	42.2	47	44	47	44	139	43.2
human	3	2.8	2	1.9	–	–	5	1.6
name	1	0.9	1	0.9	–	–	2	0.6
future orienta-tion	3	2.8	1	0.9	3	2.8	7	2.2
sex or gender	7	6.5	–	–	–	–	7	2.2
emotional states	16	15	10	9.4	15	14	41	12.8
skills	4	3.7	7	6.5	10	9.4	21	6.5
age	1	0.9	4	3.7	–	–	5	1.6
interests	3	2.8	3	2.8	3	2.8	9	2.8
abilities	–	–	5	4.7	2	1.9	7	2.2
MICROSYSTEM								
friend or peer	3	2.8	5	4.7	3	2.8	11	3.4
family member	2	1.9	3	2.8	3	2.8	8	2.5
student	2	1.9	–	–	4	3.7	6	1.9
profesional aspiration	–	–	1	0.9	–	–	1	0.3
MESOSYSTEM								
social relations	10	9.3	9	8.5	8	7.5	27	8.4
relations with nature	1	0.9	–	–	1	0.9	2	0.6
EXOSYSTEM								
member of an organisation	–	–	1	0.9	–	–	1	0.3
fun of a club	–	–	–	–	1	0.9	1	0.3
MACROSYSTEM								
village or city	–	–	–	–	3	2.8	3	0.9
nationality	2	1.9	4	3.7	–	–	6	1.9
cultural patterns	1	0.9	3	2.8	1	0.9	5	1.6
Total	107	100	107	100	107	100	321	100

In the mesosystem, social relations assumes an important role for our participants mostly through their self identification as someone who expresses interest, commitment and admiration in their relationship with others (e.g. being dedicated to others, taking care about others, living for the community, admiring other people). Social relations are important for around 8% of our respondents. Relations with nature (especially with water) and the willingness to explore the world are less cited and appear in a form of a single indication only in the first and third answer.

It could be assumed that in a familistic society, participants would be more likely to refer to issues related to the microsystem, especially to social roles concerning family of origin as well as being a relative. However, it appeared that the researched Portuguese EAs value mostly their friend and peer status (11%), suggesting the importance of this subsystem during this developmental phase. Afterwards, our respondents refer to their broad family status (8%), in particular being e.g. a daughter, sister, cousin or a granddaughter. Then, occupation identification seems to be less important, which seems surprising in a sample of university students. They occasionally underline their status as Psychology students or aspiring/future psychologists.

Regarding developing self identification, surveyed students rarely referred to elements concerning their cultural identity as a resultant of macrostructure. Around 2% of researched Portuguese EAs refer to their national identity and less than 1% to their local identification (e.g. living in a specific village or city). Participants describe themselves (1.6%) using assessment resulting from cultural patterns (e.g., being vegetarian, stylish).

Finally, in a reference to the exosystem, here we have only two answers that concern being a member of an organization or being a football fan (e.g. being a fan of Benfica).

Discussion and final conclusion

Trying out new possibilities, contributes to developing a more definite identity, which manifests itself in deeper understanding of who the individuals are, what their worldviews, beliefs and values are, how they interact with socioecology and fit into society and culture around (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). The present study concerned the search for sources of self definitions among Portuguese EAs in different systems distinguished in the ecological model by Bronfenbrenner. Portugal presents specific features that may influence the development of identity during EA,

such as socioeconomic and cultural features that impose the postponement of traditional adult milestones such as marriage, parenthood or even housing autonomy. In fact, it is a society where family values prevail and where youth unemployment, instability and housing crisis impacts on autonomy and individuation. On the basis of the research results, three main findings were formulated.

Firstly, during the process of constructing own identity projects, Portuguese EAs most often refer to the individual assets. Similar results were obtained in a study conducted on a sample of Polish students (Żyłkiewicz-Płońska, 2023). However, references to personality, character and emotional states are far more frequent among Portuguese than Polish students. It can be assumed that this is due to the fact that our respondents were studying a specific field such as Psychology. During the studies, our participants explore topics related to understanding the thoughts, emotions and behaviour of the individual and develop an awareness of themselves and about their potentials and limitations. Concluding, participation in a microsystem, (e.g. academic environment) and studying a specific course, can be reflected in the individual's constructed identity project. The strong concentration of our respondents in the first three answers on the individual dimension of the sense of identity may also be a result of the progressive individualisation of societies in highly developed and developing countries (Arnett, 2011). As stated by Castells (2008) identities are a source of meaning for the actors themselves and are constructed by them in the process of individualisation. Furthermore, being self-focused is also a characteristic phenomenon for the period of EA (Arnett, 2004) that is why this dimension is common in self definition of our respondents.

Secondly, mesosystemic references play also an important role in the identity development of the surveyed Portuguese students, which concern the sphere of interaction between the different microsystems. Social relations expressed mainly in the form of valuing and taking care of the community (especially friends), were found to play an important role in building self identification of Portuguese EAs. In comparison, in the group of Polish students, references to the mesosystem did not appear at all as assets of self-definitions (Żyłkiewicz-Płońska, 2023). The mesosystem as an important space for our respondents for drawing inspiration for their identity construction, may have its sources in the specificity of Portuguese culture, in which the value is collective being with each other, community, fellowship or the well-being of others (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Thirdly, assuming that the research was conducted in a familistic society, it came as a surprise that our Portuguese EAs, in the case of microsystetomic references, value their friend more than family status. In surveys among Polish stu-

dents, family was a more frequently mentioned source of identity references than friends (Żyłkiewicz-Płońska, 2023). Our findings contrast with the work of e.g. Reher (1998) who opposes family patterns in Southern Europe, which are based on "strong" ties between the family members, with those of North-Western Europe, where, he argues, ties have been "weak" for centuries. Patterns related to types and ways of building bonds (family, friendship) are a resultant of cultural factors, but also depend on the developmental period of respondents. Peer group membership is one of the most important subsystems, during EA. Therefore, it was presumably considered more important than the family during this developmental phase.In fact, friends and peers seem to assume a more proeminent importance comparing with family among our participants self-definitions: during university attendance it is quite common in Portugal to have a status of semi cohabitation with family of origin, being an opportunity to explore other important social networks as a way of becoming progressively autonomous.

Surprisingly, occupation identification seems to be less important in the sample of Portuguese university students comparing with the Polish one. The underrepresentation of this aspect in the constructed identity project of Portuguese participants may be due to the difficult situation of graduates, especially from the social sciences in the labour market in Portugal (Eurostat, 2023a).

Further studies are needed in order to clarify the development of self identity among EAs with emphasis in differences across societies and cultures. In fact, it may be conceived as an universal developmental stage, however it does not mean that socioeconomic and cultural features do not impact on it. It would be important to go deeper on this description through more qualitative procedures such as interviews or focus groups. Longitudinal studies may clarify the impact of important traditional markers and transitions in the development of self descriptions, such as transition to labour market or housing autonomy. The inclusion of more diversified samples, including gender and level of qualification would also be important to have a clearer view or representation of identity development among Portuguese EAs.

Summarising, intrapersonal and environmental assets (mainly meso and microsystemic) play an important role in the process of identity formation of EAs in Portugal. Hence, in educational and preventive activities, it is worth investing in the development of individual as well as environmental resources in order to strengthen the young generation of EAs who are preparing to enter adulthood and on whom the future shape of the world depends. The world, as a socioecological space, in which the identity of future generations will be developing.

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