**Understanding the meaning of being an emerging adult from a caring science perspective - a phenomenological hermeneutical study**

**Abstract**

**Background**: Caring is to promote health and alleviate suffering. This is especially important for emerging adults, whose lifeworld can be perceived as challenging to their health. **Aim:** The aim of this study was to illuminate the meaning of being an emerging adult. **Method:** A phenomenological hermeneutical method was used. **Findings:** The essential meaning of being an emerging adult is being in a quest for ethos and becoming in health. This becoming occurs when emerging adults have **freedom and independence but are also part of a secure network that includes family of origin and friends**. For emerging adults, becoming in health includes having freedom and responsibility when managing life.

# Keywords

Emerging adult, health, caring, phenomenological hermeneutics, ethos

**Background**

Being cared for is especially important for young people, whose lifeworld can be perceived as challenging. The term lifeworld can be used to describe the experience of being in the world (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Todres, 2005). In cultures where young people are allowed a prolonged period of independent role exploration during their late teens and twenties, a distinct period has arisen, called emerging adulthood, with a focus on ages 18 to 25 years of age (Arnett 2000; Arnett, 2014; Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004; Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001; Arnett, & Tanner, 2006; Cauffman, 2002; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Jensen, 2001; Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011; Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007; Syed, 2015).

Emerging adults live in highly individualized societies and experience individual freedom and independence not seen in more traditional societal contexts (Giddens, 1991; Giddens, 2018; Ziehe, Fornäs, & Retzlaff, 1989). Consistent with such individualization, an individual’s vulnerability and susceptibility to harm has been linked to the person and his/her individual resources (Eckersley, 2005; Mechanic & Tanner, 2007; Rogers, 1997). An assumption follows that being liable to harm is also relevant to emerging adults. Studying the lifeworld of emerging adults may provide a deeper understanding of the meaning of being an emerging adult.

For emerging adults in a society based on individualization, a family of origin becomes the main relational asset. For example, when emerging adults learn how to self-manage health issues (Ryan & Sawin, 2009) or transition from pediatric to adult health care (Bower et al., 2017; Heath, Farre, & Shaw, 2017), their family of origin is an important asset. In a society where the importance of a person’s family of origin is substantial, emerging adults who lack a supportive family or other supportive networks are more vulnerable; one can discern a polarization between emerging adults regarding their individual resources and the support systems they access (McLean & Syed, 2014). Consequently, some emerging adults will have a positive experience of emerging adulthood while others struggle (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008; Lanctot & Poulin, 2018; Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

Emerging adults are a psychologically vulnerable group, because this time in a person’s life is a peak period for psychological diagnoses and self-destructive behavior (Griffin et al., 2018; Wasserman, Cheng, & Jiang, 2005). As emerging adults need more time for maturation, parental support is also needed for a longer time (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Chronically ill emerging adults need support from their family of origin (Reiss, Gibson & Walker, 2005) when they transition from pediatric to adult health care (Kipps et al., 2002). A poorly managed transition is a health risk that can further compromise emerging adults’ health (Crowley, Wolfe, Lock & McKee 2011; White et al., 2018) and lead to increased vulnerability.

Creating supportive communities for emerging adults is subsequently an important undertaking in health promotion (World Health Organization, 2013), especially for those vulnerable due to the lack of a supportive family of origin (Bele & Kvalsund, 2015; Hurst, 2008; Mechanic & Tanner, 2007; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Emerging adults are also significant consumers of emergency health care services, often for less acute problems (Fortuna, Robbins, Mani, & Halterman, 2010). This may indicate that emerging adults seek help not merely for medical and nursing interventions, but for personal support in managing life.

In the profession of nursing and in consideration of caring theories, the use of dialogue to create supportive patient-caregiver relationships has positively promoted health and caring outcomes, an approach known as person-centered care (PCC) (Ekman et al., 2011). PCC entails caregivers being able to connect with a patient on a more profound level and knowing the person behind the patient, as a human being with reason, will, feelings, and needs. PCC requires accounting for the patient’s narrated life story as well as developing a partnership in caring encounters (Ekman et al. 2011).

To develop positive encounters with emerging adults in professional nursing as framed by caring science, nurses must understand their lifeworld and the meaning of being an emerging adult. Few studies relevant to this topic have been found in nursing and caring literature. Therefore, the aim of this study was to illuminate the meaning of being an emerging adult.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the study was based on the caritative theory, part of the caring science tradition. In caritative theory, a human being is considered to be in a constant “becoming” toward deeper wholeness (Eriksson, 2018; Lindström, Nyström, & Zetterlund, 2017). In the same way that a human being on the existential level is in a becoming, health in the caring science tradition is also seen as a becoming: again, a movement toward deeper wholeness.

The movement in health toward deeper wholeness occurs as doing, being, and becoming. Doing includes what the human being does for his/her health, being pertains to the balance sought in relationships with others, and becoming the seeking of harmony and inner balance in life (Eriksson, 2007; Eriksson, 2018; Eriksson, Bondas-Salonen, Herberts, Lindholm, & Matilainen, 1995; Lindström, 1999; Lindström et al., 2014). In caritative theory, health promotion is linked to confirming the human being on an existential level (Eriksson, 2018; Eriksson, 1987; Eriksson, 1992) as an entity of body, soul and spirit (Eriksson, 2018). Understanding emerging adults from this perspective may be seen as a movement in becoming in health. Young adults lives today are fundamentally changed from previous generation’s. Thus, to illuminate the meaning of being an emerging adult and understanding this from a existential level is essential.

**Method**

**Design**

A qualitative research design was used to describe the lived experience of a complex phenomenon of what is was like to become an emerging adult for example in relation to health and well-being (Dahlberg, Todres, & Galvin, 2009; Galvin & Todres, 2012; Todres, Galvin, & Dahlberg, 2007). Specifically, a phenomenological hermeneutical method (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) was chosen for the study. Written responses to a question posed by the researcher were the data source.

**Participants**

To illuminate the meaning of being an emerging adult, first-year university students (18–29 years) enrolled in a methodology course at a Swedish-language university in Finland were asked to participate in the study. The students had declared majors in the humanistic sciences (political science, social science, caring science. or developmental psychology) and attended a presentation on the study during a regularly scheduled lecture hour.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Board for research ethics (FEN) at Åbo Akademi University (No. 3/2013). During the entire course of the study, ethical principles in accordance with recommendations from the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012) and general international research ethical guidelines (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008) were followed.

To ensure ethical conduct, participants were informed of their rights and provided with a pre-written letter of consent. Plain language was used in the letter of consent, because in research with emerging adults, it is important that the language used is easily understood. A signed and returned letter of consent was required for participation in the study.

The participants could withdraw their consent and decline to participate in the study at any time. One student declined participation after having submitted an essay. The student’s essay was destroyed.

The data were securely stored, and only the researchers had access to and read the coded essays. This occurred in order to guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and the reliability of the research. While direct quotations have been used in the results, any information about the participants’ social situation or anything else that might have constituted an intrusion into their privacy was removed.

**Data Collection**

The students were asked to write an essay in which they explored the following question: What is your life philosophy concerning your now and your future? The students could choose whether to write the essay immediately after the study was described, during the remaining lecture time, or submit it later. Requirements included that the essay be composed on a computer and saved on a USB-memory stick provided by the researcher.

Twenty-six students agreed to participate: 22 women, 3 men, and 1 non-gendered. The material gathered consisted of 40 pages of text and 14 053 words in total.

**Data Analysis**

Using a phenomenological hermeneutical method (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004), interpretation of the written texts began with a naïve reading of the entire material to formulate a naïve understanding. In order to grasp the text’s meaning as a whole, the naïve understanding is articulated as the text was read several times. The text was allowed to “speak,” so that the researcher could become touched and moved by it. The naïve reading is regarded as a first conjecture and is validated or invalidated by the subsequent structural analysis (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

In the structural analysis, *meaning units,* which could be part of a sentence, a sentence, several sentences, or a paragraph that answered the research question, were gathered and reflected on. The meaning units were formulated into *condensed meaning units*. The essential meaning of each meaning unit was expressed in everyday words and as concisely as possible. The condensed meaning units were then read through again and reflected on with regard to similarities and differences and grouped into *subthemes*. The subthemes were then grouped into *themes*. The themes were next reflected on against the background of the naïve understanding, with the understanding that the themes should validate or invalidate the naïve understanding. (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Talseth, Lindseth, Jacobsson, & Norberg, 1999) (Table 1). A theme is a thread of meaning formulated as condensed descriptions and in such a way that the meaning is disclosed.

TABLE 1 HERE

The thematic structural analysis was followed by the formation of a *comprehensive understanding*, where the main themes were summarized and reflected on in relation to the research aim: to illuminate the meaning of being an emerging adult, and the study context. In this step, the researchers reflected on their preunderstanding to revise, broaden, and deepen their awareness of the phenomenon and to eliminate some degree of bias. In the comprehensive understanding, literature that seemed appropriate for helping revise, widen, and deepen the researchers’ understanding of the text was also included, in order to further illuminate the interview text and interpretation (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 HERE

**Results**

**Naïve Understanding**

A naïve understanding was formulated to illuminate the meaning of being an emerging adult.

The meaning of being an emerging adult is to be in a turning point in life. It is to move from the known and familiar life of adolescence to the unknown life of adulthood. In young adulthood, one “*would [like to] dare break free if it feels [right] and test new paths”*. Being an emerging adult can be both exciting and demanding. It can be exciting to experience freedom in the ontological sense alongside independence and live on one’s own, but also demanding to shoulder the larger responsibilities inherent in managing one’s life. Shouldering responsibilities entails facing and making multiple choices, life choices that will essentially define the rest of one’s life. Having *“support from one’s family is important when choosing education”.* Also, freedom and independence in a sense entail loss – the loss of one’s old life for a new life, the loss of one’s childhood home for a new residence, the loss of an old school for a new school. As an emerging adult, it is important to find one’s new “position” in life. This includes finding new close relationships with people one can depend on, which in turn includes the reevaluation of friendships from the past and the establishment of new close relationships.

**Structural Analysis**

The meaning of being an emerging adult was illuminated through the theme “Managing new responsibilities”, with the subthemes *Managing one’s perceived responsibility* and *Having a responsibility to one’s heart,* and the theme “Managing one’s freedom and independence”, with the subthemes *Establishing close friendships* and *Having a close relationship with one’s family of origin*. The themes are illuminated below with participant quotations.

**Managing New Responsibilities**

The meaning of being an emerging adult relates to managing one’s new, perceived responsibilities, that is demands being made by one’s self, i.e., the voice of the heart, and perceived demands from others.

***Managing one’s perceived responsibility***

As an emerging adult, when making choices that will impact one’s future life, one perceives not only a sense of responsibility toward oneself but also toward others, one’s family of origin and (future) family of procreation, and society. One participant stated that he/she sought, “*a job that I will feel happy with and that I really want to work with for the rest of my life.*” Yet the achievement of such can be difficult because it may require understanding, “*why I’m making the choices I make, what impact they have on my future.”*

As an emerging adult one also shoulders responsibilities to one’s self and one’s (future) family of procreation. This can include finding a job/career where life outside of work can also be enjoyed because, *“I don’t want to work so much that I forget myself and my dreams.”* As seen here, the “dream” is to find well-paid work so that one can support one’s (future) family of procreation without too many sacrifices. As one participant expressed it, “*I absolutely do not want that my family and children will suffer because of my work or that I have other duties that take time from my nearest and dearest.”*

As an emerging adult, one also perceives a sense of responsibility to one’s family of origin and seeks to make them proud so as not to be considered a “disappointment”: “*I want that my parents will be proud of me.”* As an emerging adult, one even feels a sense of responsibility toward society, the responsibility to achieve one’s very best from the opportunities given: “*What a gift we are given in Finland through free education.”*

***Having a responsibility to one’s heart***

Seen here, being an emerging adult includes *experiencing a sense of*responsibility to the self and to one’s heart. It is important to listen to the voice of one’s heart, because otherwise there is a risk of becoming unhappy or feeling “trapped:”

I have allowed other people to steer my life. When it has gone too far and I have felt like a prisoner I have tried to break free, which has led to that I have made many poor decisions, that for example have hurt other people.

Listening to the voice of one’s heart gives confidence regarding that one has done one’s best in a situation of uncertainty, where one has dared to try something new: “*A few years ago I began to live by the philosophy to ‘run my own race’, follow my heart as often as I can and try new challenges.*” However, listening to one’s heart can also be demanding:

I often suffer from indecision and when I do not follow that which feels most correct I suffer from enormous anxiety, but even if I only act in accordance with [my] heart anxiety can [creep] up if I [in the end] made the wrong choice, and how would my life have looked if I [had chosen] differently?

**Managing one’s freedom** **and independence**

Being an emerging adult also includes managing one’s freedom. As an emerging adult, one is on a quest for freedom and independence. One breaks away from a life structured by others to seek freedom. Freedom and independence however, entail that one must in a metaphorical sense find a new place in life, where one is surrounded by people chosen by oneself. Therefore, the establishment of new close relationships is an important aspect underlying the meaning of being an independent emerging adult.

***Establishing close friendships***

Being an emerging adult involves establishing close and reliable friendships, with friends who can provide support during one’s quest for freedom. “Deep” friendships are created when one has time to spend with close friends, but for this to occur one must be able to prioritize one’s friends and spend “quality” time with them. Establishing new close friendships also entails re-evaluating one’s existing friendships. The participants noted that they could leave some older friendships behind when deepening their relationship with others: *“I find new friends and maybe lose some old [ones], but the important [thing] is that I feel there is someone who cares.”* It is important that emerging adults establish new close friendships, because the friends one finds during one’s quest for independence to a certain extent replace one’s family of origin.

When it comes to friends it feels like they become more and more important over the years, especially now when I have left home one can say that they replace my family to a certain extent, it is with them that I can seek comfort, discuss problems, ask for advice and feel important. It is also important for me that they feel that I also give them [what] they give me.

***Having a close relationship with one’s family of origin***

An essential part of the meaning of being an emerging adult and managing one’s freedom and independence is changing one’s role in one’s family of origin. It is during this period that one can deepen one’s relationship with one’s family of origin, this time as an adult. As an emerging adult striving for independence, the important close relationship one has with one’s family of origin remains important, but in a different way than in the past. The meaning of being part of a family that emerged from the results was to have a secure network and unconditional love. According to the participants, family constitutes a person’s *“inner circle and secure support”,* and one’s familyof origin is *“those who one can always trust when one has it tough in life.”* An emerging adult’s quest for independence is less frightening if one has a supportive family. The participants noted that as a source of unconditional love and respect one’s family of origin alleviates the fear of failure and that one can return to one’s family regardless of failure or success:

Whatever happens, I know that I have my family and that is a very valuable feeling and that in itself makes me dare challenge myself and dare take risks because the fear of failure does not scare me so much that it would prevent me from trying.

An emerging adult’s family is a secure stepping stone in the quest for independence that one always can return to if life becomes too difficult to manage. If one feels lonely moving away from home, having a family can make this step easier: “I think it is difficult to live alone in a studio apartment and do everything by myself and all the time come home to a dark, cold ‘home’.”

**Discussion**

**Comprehensive Understanding**

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of a phenomenon, reflection on the naïve understanding and structural analysis of the phenomenon together with relevant previous studies and theories was required (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). To deepen understanding of the meaning of being an emerging adult, the findings were reflected on in light of relevant theories and previous research. From the comprehensive understanding it emerged that the essential meaning of being an emerging adult is being in a quest for ethos and becoming in health, bymanaging the emerging adult’s freedom and independence.

When as an emerging adult one seeks freedom and independence, the individual also finds responsibility (Sartre, 1958). It can be both demanding and exciting to experience the freedom, independence and responsibility involved in managing important life choices. Having the freedom and independence to choose a person’s own path in life can be an exciting adventure, but the responsibility that comes with this can also be arduous. This is particularly true in a highly complex world (Giddens, 2018), where nothing is certain and as an emerging adult one will need to constantly adapt to new life plans (Bauman, 2013).

An essential meaning that emerged from the comprehensive understanding is that for emerging adults, listening to the voice of their heart while managing responsibility is important. In life, listening to one’s heart constitutes an important lifeline, compass and stepping stone. Ethos, the internal values shaped by an individual history and the culture her or she is a part of, plays an important role in one’s becoming because it constitutes an ethical compass in life or the voice of the heart, which guides the person in life (Eriksson, 2018; Hilli, 2007; Näsman, Lindholm, & Eriksson, 2008; Lindström, Nyström, & Zetterlund, 2017).

Thus, when making decisions or ethical choices in life, not only is advice from others important but an emerging adult also needs to follow theinner voice or conscience (Ricoeur, 1981; Ricoeur, 1992; Ricœur & Kearney, 1996). When simultaneously managing freedom, independence and responsibility, emerging adults not only need to listen to advice from others in order to follow norms, but they should also, and most importantly, listen to the voice of their heart, their ethos.

Engaging in the affirmation of one’s ethos is important for the experience of health (Eriksson, 2018; Hilli, 2007). In PCC, the person in care is assumed to be central to the care being given, which is an ethical approach that respects the patient’s life story and enables a more equal partnership (Ekman et al., 2011). Emerging adults suffer if their movement toward ethos is hindered, because this negatively affects their movement toward health (Eriksson, 2018; Eriksson et al., 1995; Lindström, 1999; Lindström et al., 2014;). For emerging adults, becoming in health is a balance between freedom, independence and responsibility. A too great focus on responsibility can induce suffering, because emerging adults can feel trapped or forced into a situation or life that they do not wish to live. If the choices emerging adults make only reflect responsibility, there is a risk that life will become a mere “mechanical action” or duty, and life will be lived without deeper reflection. In the long term, such a focus can lead to suffering, because individuals can feel trapped in a situation where their life has no deeper meaning (Lindström, 1999). In the same way, if emerging adults place too great a focus on freedom, they can also suffer. For example, when parents take on emerging adults’ responsibilities (as “helicopter parents”), emerging adults can lose their feeling of competence (Juul, 2014), which in turn negatively affects their experience of dignity. In regard to health promotion for emerging adults and seen from an existential perspective (Eriksson, 2018; Eriksson, 1987; Eriksson & Eriksson, 1992), focusing on ethos as a movement between freedom, independence and responsibility could be beneficial for promoting emerging adults’ becoming in health.

**Strengths and limitations**

A critical assessment of the study’s strengths and limitations was performed (Polit & Beck, 2004). The participants were all first-year students and emerging adults and were therefore considered suitable participants for this study. One limitation is that the participants had declared majors in the humanistic sciences (political science, social science, caring science or developmental psychology), which may affect transferability as they may more strongly reflect a humanistic view of life than students majoring in other subjects. Another limitation is that the participant group was relatively small and mainly comprised of women, which may have affected the subjective meaning revealed. One strength was that the study method was specifically selected for the targeted participant group; because university students are familiar with writing essays, the use of essays was considered suitable. The topic of the essay was also suitable for the participant group. Unlike in an interview situation, through the medium of writing students have time to contemplate and reflect on their thoughts and feelings without being interrupted or feeling exposed.

**Conclusion**

The meaning of being an emerging adult is being in a quest for one’s ethos and becoming in health bymanaging one’s freedom, independence and responsibility. This ethical “quest” challenges healthcare staff in their PCC approach when in a dialog with an emerging adult. It requires that nurses and doctors are receptive to the young person’s lifeworld and give support in a demanding phase of the emerging adult’s life. Understanding the meaning of being an emerging adult can also help leaders and educators re-evaluate practice when shaping education and when training emerging adults in work life. For this to be realized, further research on this topic is needed.

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Table 1. A simpliﬁed example of how data were grouped into the main theme, “Being in a quest for one’s ethos and becoming in health”

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Meaning units | Condensed meaning units | Sub-theme | Themes | Main theme |
| The job also brings a stabile income that according to me is important. To eventually be able to build a house, buy a “nice” car, help [my] future children financially during their schooling, etc.  | **A job that brings a stabile income is important. To be able to build a house, buy a car, help [my] future children financially.** | **Managing one’s perceived responsibility** | **Managing new responsibilities** | **Being in a quest for one’s ethos and becoming in health** |

Figure 1. The main theme, themes and subthemes, all describing the meaning of being a young adult.