The Family Stress Model and Implications on Adolescent Depression

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Background

Depression affects around 11% of adolescents (NIMH, n.d.) and is a risk factor for death by suicide, the third leading cause of death among youth ages 15-24 (CDC, 2014).

The family stress model (Conger, Rueter, & Conger, 2000) posits that compromised parenting as a result of economic stress and compromise has negative influences on adolescent health and adjustment. However, the family stress model has typically focused on adolescence and less on the transition to adulthood and particularly how environments in youth can be carried into the adult period.

The transition to adulthood is a period marked by fluctuation and growing independence, both emotionally and financially (Arnett, 2001). However, in times of economic instability, youth rely more heavily on their parents for support in these areas (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Schoeni & Ross, 2005).

The Present Study

The purpose of the current study is to apply the family stress model to a nationally representative sample of adolescents and examine the relation between financial stress, parenting, and depression from adolescence and across the transition to adulthood.

We predict that higher parental financial stress will be associated with compromised relationships with parents across time, which will subsequently be associated with increased depression.

Methods

Parental Financial Stress was measured with 4 yes/no binary indicators of whether parents had enough money to pay their bills and whether they received Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, or a housing subsidy.

W1 Family Cohesion measured parenting by asking adolescents how strongly (1 = not at all to 5 = very much) they believed their family cared about them, paid attention to them, understood them, and had fun together. W3 Parent-Child Relationship was measured by asking how close, how warm, and how much they enjoy time with their mother figure (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

W3 Financial Stress was measured by three dichotomous items of financial strain, financial access to credit cards and luxury items, and income. W4 was the same except financial access was replaced with an item asking participants to place themselves on a financial ladder of wealthiest to least wealthy.

Depression was measured using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, with 20 items at W1 and 10 items at W3 and W4.

Controls included parent education, parent health, and adolescent age at W1; employment at W3; and marital status (currently married or not), parental status (a child at home or not), and employment at W4.

We used structural equation modeling in Mplus 7.2 for all analyses to control for measurement error and to examine cross-tagged associations across time. We controlled for weight, strata, and cluster sampling design effects.

Results

This study demonstrates the negative impact of financial stress on adolescent and young adult wellbeing through compromised parenting as long as twelve years later. Though the indirect effect size, as small, it was significant, and shows the long-lasting effects of economic pressures on families.

There are important implications for policy, specifically, greater financial support in the form of programs and education may alleviate financial stressors. Further, general support for parenting may be warranted for families facing financial stress with limited financial assets.

Acknowledgements

This research uses data from Add Health, a program project directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter B. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and funded by grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgment is due to Debra P. Howren and Christopher J. Smith for assistance in the construction of these data. Information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.

The authors acknowledge funding from the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families. A pdf version of this academic paper is available at: http://francesmcclelland.arizona.edu/papers