



The relationships among family income, parental depression, and adolescent aggression in South Korea: A latent growth mediation model



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ABSTRACT

Although the Family Stress Model is well-established with many examples, there is relatively little information about South Korean families, which are known for greater bonding between parents and adolescents. The current study examined whether changes in parents' depression would mediate the relationship between income dynamics and youth development changes in South Korea. The participants were 561 families who had completed the Korean Welfare Panel Study at three time points that covered the full span from elementary to high school. A latent growth mediation model was used, and the results indicated that 1) family income was associated with parental depression and youth aggression over time and 2) early parental depression fully mediated the relationship between early family income and subsequent youth aggression rates over time. These findings have major implications for policies and interventions with regard to low-income South Korean families.

1. Introduction

It is well established that economic hardship increases the risk of family socio-emotional malfunctioning (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). In particular, the Family Stress Model (FSM) proposed by Conger and Conger (2002) and Conger, Conger, and Martin (2010) outlines a theoretical process for how economic hardship exacerbates adolescent maladjustment primarily through parents' emotional distress. For example, low incomes are associated with emotional problems for parents (e.g., depressive symptoms and feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity, and loss of control) and, in turn, the use of rejecting parenting strategies, thereby increasing the risk of emotion regulation problems in children (Conger et al., 2002; Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

The FSM has been tested with diverse samples and diverse methodologies over the past twenty years. Although there has been persistent evidence that parental depression mediates the relationship between family economic situations and adolescents' externalizing problems such as aggression (Conger et al., 2010; Conger & Conger, 2002; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Conger, Reuter, & Conger, 2000), there are still areas, in terms of methodology and samples, in which the existing literature can be extended. First, despite consistent evidence of a significant association among family income, parents' functioning, and youth outcomes (Conger et al., 2000; McLoyd, 1998), little is known about whether income change is associated with

improvement in family members' functioning over time. A within-person change approach such as latent growth mediation modeling (LGMM; Selig & Preacher, 2009) may be appropriate for addressing this question. In a few studies, gains in income for low-income families were associated with improved parental functioning (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2006; Newland, Crnic, Cox, & Mills-Koonce, 2013) and reductions in children's problem behaviors (Dearing, Taylor, & McCartney, 2004; White, Liu, Nair, & Tein, 2015). To date and to our knowledge, however, no study based on the FSM has examined whether changes in parental functioning might mediate the association between income changes and youth outcome differences.

Second, to date, the relationships among the Family Stress Model's pathways have been tested with representative samples from the United States (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002) as well as African-American samples (Conger et al., 2002), Latino samples (Formoso, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2007; White et al., 2015), and Chinese-American samples (Benner & Kim, 2010). Few studies, however, have demonstrated the FSM's relationships with families living in Asia in general and in South Korea in particular; given the unique cultural values and socialization practices observed in South Korean families, examining whether the FSM's process operates similarly in South Korean families is of interest. For example, unlike the European or European American emphasis on independence in adolescence (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006), South Korean youths are expected to depend entirely on their parents economically

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until they become adults (Fulgini, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Jeong, 2009; Kim & Lee, 2011).

In conclusion, to our knowledge, no study has applied the FSM to a South Korean sample using the within-person change approach. Little is known about the ways in which changes in income affect changes in the psychological functioning of South Korean family members. Therefore, with the current study, we aimed to examine how the FSM applies to South Korean families using a within-person change approach.

2. Literature review

2.1. The associations between family income and parental depression

The relationship between low income and depression has long interested researchers. Many studies have supported the idea that adults who live in poverty are more likely to live in highly stressful conditions (Conger et al., 2000, 2002), and such chronic stress can disrupt task persistence and produce disequilibrium in self-regulatory behavior (Evans & English, 2002), which in turn is connected to a greater risk of developing depression (Newland et al., 2013; Ponnet, 2014).

Many researchers argue that income and depressive symptoms are not static but change over time (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004; Corcoran & Chaudry, 1997; Duncan, 1988). Therefore, current research has begun using longitudinal data to determine whether economic resource changes are associated with depressive symptom changes (e.g., Dearing et al., 2006; Kozyrskyj, Kendall, Jacoby, Sly, & Zubrick, 2010; Newland et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2002; Zimmerman & Katon, 2005). A study conducted with young mothers of children under age three showed that increased income was associated with improvement in their depressive symptoms (Dearing & Taylor, 2007). Newland et al. (2013) examined the association between changes in income and parents' psychological distress using data from parents living in poor rural areas in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. They reported that increased family income was significantly related to decreased depression and increased supportive, sensitive parenting behaviors. Other studies have supported the idea that changes in income were associated with changes in individuals' depression (Costello, Compton, Keeler, & Angold, 2003; Dearing et al., 2004). In particular, income loss can damage the sense of self-worth, which can aggravate depressive symptoms (Gupta & Huston, 2009; Turner, 1995), whereas income gains mitigated depressive symptoms, especially when these gains were sufficient to lift families out of poverty (Macmillan, McMorris, & Kruttschnitt, 2004).

2.2. The associations between family income and adolescent aggression

Family income is also related to externalizing problems among children (Dearing et al., 2006; White et al., 2015; Yeung et al., 2002). Dearing et al. (2004), for instance, revealed that income decreases were associated with more externalizing behaviors in children aged one to six years using longitudinal data from the National Institute of Child Health and Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (2002; $N = 1132$). Prior studies had indicated that income changes were less consistently associated with adolescents' internalizing problems than they were with externalizing problems (Dearing et al., 2006). This difference is not surprising considering that genetic influences on externalizing problems are relatively modest whereas family environmental influences are greater for disruptive behaviors than they are for internalizing problems (Plomin, DeFries, McClearn, & Rutter, 1997).

According to the Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 2000), family economic pressure indirectly increases children's risks for problem behaviors by increasing parents' psychological distress. That is, there is persistent evidence that parental depression mediates between the family's economic situation and adolescents' externalizing problems (Conger et al., 2000, 2002). However, researchers who investigate the

FSM often focus on family income at a specific time or use aggregate longitudinal income data to form a static mean (Newland et al., 2013); using these income measures to describe families' functioning related to low income may under- or overestimate both parents' and children's development.

2.3. Applications to South Korean populations

Examining FSM using the within-person change approach is important for South Korean adolescents because they are likely to be more financially dependent on their parents than are Western adolescents (Fulgini et al., 1999; Jeong, 2009; Kim & Lee, 2011). Many South Korean parents tend to live vicariously through their children's accomplishments (Hahm & Gutterman, 2001; Um & Kim, 2015). Because they commonly think that their children's success is a way to escape the poverty cycle and provide security later in life, South Korean parents tend to dedicate themselves to their children regardless of their economic situations (Chung, 2009; Ha & Kang, 2012; Jeong & Chun, 2010). In addition, because of the high competition for entering a university in South Korea, adolescents are expected to be dedicated to school achievement rather than being financially independent (Feldman, Mont-Reynaud, & Rosenthal, 1992; Fulgini et al., 1999; Jeong, 2009; Kim & Lee, 2011); only 30% of adolescents in South Korea have ever had a part-time job (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2016), compared with 80% of adolescents in the United States (Market Watch, 2013). In light of these cultural characteristics, the mediating effect of parents is expected to be strong in the relationship between family income and youth aggression in South Korea.

Most studies that have used Western youth samples consistently indicate significant differences in the levels of problem behavior between poorer and wealthier youth (Engle & Black, 2008; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). In contrast, the empirical studies of South Korean samples report inconsistent results on the relationship between family income and adolescents' behavioral problems. Some studies found no significant differences in the levels of problem behaviors between adolescents from impoverished families versus those from non-poor families (Ha & Kang, 2012; Kim, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2011). A few studies even found that adolescents from impoverished families showed better social and emotional functioning than did young people from better-off backgrounds (e.g., Lee & Park, 2000; Oh, 2000). In regard to these findings, some researchers have argued for a strong parental influence on the relationship between low income and adolescents' behavioral problems in South Korea (Chung, 2009; Kim, 2015). The empirical evidence using cross-sectional data has commonly found that the parent factors fully mediated the associations between family economic situations and youth developmental outcomes in South Korea (Chang & Chung, 2012; Ha & Kang, 2012; Kim, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2011).

Thus, when the FSM using the within-person change approach is applied to a South Korean sample, it is expected that parental factors will fully mediate the association between family economic situation and adolescent aggression.

2.4. The current study

Although previous studies have demonstrated that parental depression mediates between family economic situations and children's externalizing problems based on the FSM (Conger et al., 2000, 2002), there is limited understanding of whether parents' depression changes mediate between income dynamics and youth development changes, especially in South Korea, which is known for its stronger dependence between parents and adolescents. In an effort to address these gaps, in the current study, we examined whether changes in family income among South Korean families would affect changes in parental depression and adolescent aggression at three time points; to this end, we utilized a nationally representative sample of families from the Korean Welfare Panel Study (KOWEPS). We hypothesized that (1) family

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