Reproducing economic inequality: Longitudinal relations of self-control, social support, and maternal education

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ABSTRACT

Self-control in adolescence may be related to the development of economic capital in the transition to adulthood. Drawing on longitudinal data from the Project for Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (n = 669; 46.5% Hispanic; 51.4% female; Mage = 15.16 years), this study examined whether this relation was mediated by support from family and friends and moderated by maternal education levels. Non-invariant structural equation models suggested differing processes in the reproduction of economic inequality across generations. Among the lower maternal education group, self-control in adolescence and support from friends positively related to later income. Family support negatively related to income. Among the higher maternal education group, self-control in adolescence was only related to support from friends during young adulthood. Findings show one process through which initial positions within the social system inform young adults’ development of economic capital, leading to the reproduction of economic inequality.

1. Introduction

Economic inequality is rising in the U.S. (Sasson, 2016). This unequal distribution of wealth creates further inequality in access to material goods, institutions, opportunities, and life expectancies (e.g., Chetty et al., 2016; Raver, Roy, & Pressler, 2015; Vargas Lascano, material goods, institutions, opportunities, and life expectancies (e.g., equal distribution of wealth creates further inequality in access to

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relationships on developmental outcomes may be attenuated by differences in context and experience related to economic inequality. For example, self-control may act as a protective factor in some types of disadvantaged neighborhood contexts, but not protective in more advanced contexts (Anderson, Donlan, McDermott, & Zaff, 2015; McDermott, Donlan, Anderson, & Zaff, 2017). Alternately, research shows that youth from high socioeconomic status (SES) households may accrue greater benefits from social support than their low SES counterparts (Scott et al., 2016). As such, the relations between self-control, social support, and economic outcomes may be moderated by contextual factors that situate the individual within broader social structures.

The current investigation focuses on maternal education levels as integral to these differences in context and experience, and aims to examine the distinct effects of maternal education from other factors that inform the socioeconomic status (e.g., income) of her family. For example, the relation between individuals’ social resources and their occupational outcomes may be moderated by their mothers’ education levels as these social relationships may reflect the advantages and disadvantages associated with her education (e.g., material resources, educational opportunities, and connections to or information about employment opportunities; Bourdieu, 1985). Maternal education is a significant predictor of children’s later income, career orientations, and career stability (e.g., Carneiro, Meghir, & Parey, 2013; Pulkinnen, Ohranen, & Toivanen, 1999), as well as the degree to which social relationships may predict positive youth outcomes (Scott et al., 2016). In other words, although self-control and social support may relate to economic outcomes, they do so within, and in relation to, social structures that shape whether and how these factors relate to individuals’ later outcomes, and these social structures are shaped, in part, by education.

Understanding the development of economic capital (e.g., money, property rights; Bourdieu, 1985) during the transition to adulthood is important because these early sources of income relate to individuals’ future health and financial well-being (e.g., Vuolo et al., 2014). Furthermore, unpacking these processes may illuminate important antecedents of social and economic inequality. In the current study, I examine whether and how self-control, social support, and maternal education interrelate to inform young adults’ economic outcomes. In doing so, this study adds to the literature by examining variation in a process by which economic, social, and human capital may be transmitted to young adults (Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O’Brien, 2011), aiding in the reproduction of economic inequality.

2. Theoretical framework

The sociocultural self-model posits that individuals’ skills, values, beliefs, and attitudes are mutually constitutive with the material resources and structural conditions of their contexts (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). This theoretical perspective aims to unify structural and individualistic models of behavior to understand economic inequality. Whereas an individualistic framework would argue that differences in self-control relate to the reproduction of inequality through behavioral pathways (e.g., creating stronger social support, setting goals; Schmidt et al., 2012), a structural perspective might focus on access to material goods or the physical environment (e.g., homophily within network structure) including individuals’ inherited access to contemporary systems through “luck of the draw” factors (e.g., maternal education levels, race, sex). Although economic inequality is often viewed through the lens of individualistic versus structural constructs, either of these frames alone may limit the theories, research, and interventions aimed at understanding and reducing it (Stephens et al., 2012). In unifying these perspectives, this model provides a lens for understanding how and why psychological characteristics may differentially relate to outcomes across sociocultural contexts, placing an emphasis on the self that emerges from the interrelation of person and context (Stephens et al., 2012).

The current study draws on this lens to examine whether and how personal characteristics (e.g., self-control) and structural conditions (e.g., maternal education) interrelate to predict economic outcomes in the transition to adulthood. In other words, I use this perspective to understand how self-control functions in relation to the social, physical, and economic realities of the contexts in which people live and work. In the remainder of this review, I examine research on the relations of self-control, social support, economic outcomes, and maternal education from research derived from individualistic perspectives first, followed by research from structural perspectives. Then, I integrate these perspectives to describe the current investigation.

3. Individualistic perspective

3.1. Self-control, social support, and economic outcomes

Prior research within individualistic frames examines the behavioral pathways through which self-control relates to economic outcomes. This research shows that individuals who rate high on self-control have high levels of job search preparation behaviors and intentions (Baay, de Ridder, Eccles, van der Lippe, & van Aken, 2014), later extrinsic career success (e.g., salary and occupational prestige), intrinsic career success (e.g., career satisfaction; Converse et al., 2012), and a high career orientation (i.e., occupational status, education, present work situation, and career stability; Pulkinnen et al., 1999). This research posits that high self-control helps individuals find, obtain, and maintain employment because it helps them to create adaptive habits and routines, lowers the potential for distraction and disengagement from the job search process, and may allow individuals who are currently employed to regulate their behavior to meet the demands of the workplace (e.g., meeting deadlines; Baay, de Ridder, et al., 2014; Daly et al., 2015; Schmidt et al., 2012). Furthermore, children’s and adolescents’ self-control may enable individuals to control their impulses and develop positive interpersonal relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2014; Krueger, Caspi, Moffitt, White, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996). Indeed, high levels of self-control in the transition to adulthood are related to better interpersonal skills and relationships (Tangney et al., 2004). These social skills and relationships may, in turn, help individuals to obtain employment (e.g., Aguilera, 2002; Granovetter, 1974).

During adolescence and the transition to adulthood, strong social ties can provide individuals with direct assistance including emotional, financial, and informational guidance which may help them to attain employment (Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998). For example, teenagers often obtain jobs through parents and other adults in their immediate community (Granovetter, 1974; Kramarz & Skans, 2014). Perceived support from parents may also represent a latent “safety net,” enabling youth to take calculated risks (e.g., pursuing graduate education, starting a business; Hardie & Seltzer, 2016) and allowing them to weather periods of low income, unemployment, and relationship instability (e.g., Settersten & Ray, 2010). Alternately, friends may provide the widest access to different employment positions (Lin & Dumin, 1986), and friendship networks are positively associated with participation in the labor force (Aguilera, 2002). Indeed, high levels of perceived support from family and friends, including whether young people feel supported and would turn to social relationships for advice, is associated with economic well-being, including greater earnings and lower receipt of welfare in dollars, particularly among low-income populations (Hardie & Seltzer, 2016; Harknett, 2006; Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2005). Conversely, low levels of perceived social support are related to low employment rates (Harknett, 2006).
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