



Reinforcement or compensation? The effects of parents' work and financial conditions on adolescents' work values during the Great Recession[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The Great Recession brought many changes to the work and financial lives of American families. Little is known, however, about how changes in parental work conditions in recessionary times influence children's vocational development. Drawing on data from the Youth Development Study, we examine whether parents' recessionary experiences shape adolescents' work values. The findings indicate that adolescents' work values are shaped through a cross-generational reinforcement model; both extrinsic and intrinsic values are stronger when parental work conditions are more rewarding. In an exception to this pattern, unemployment among parents with low levels of education (high school degrees or less) is positively associated with children's extrinsic and intrinsic orientations, more consistent with a compensation model.

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The Great Recession of 2008–2009 brought many changes to the work and financial lives of American families, as unemployment soared, job security eroded, and employees' job duties were redefined to cover existing workloads with fewer employees. Unemployment rose from 5% in December of 2007 to 10% at its peak in October of 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Hurd and Rohwedder (2010) estimate that more than one in three American households experienced either unemployment, negative equity in their home, or failure to make a house payment between 2008 and 2009. Recent research documents shifts in adult work value orientations in response to recessionary experiences (Johnson, Sage, & Mortimer, 2012). Little is known, however, about how changes in parents' work conditions in hard economic times influence the vocational development of their adolescent children.

The formation of work values is a key component of vocational development; these orientations serve as a guide in occupational choice (Johnson & Mortimer, 2011; Weisgram, Bigler, & Liben, 2010) and for evaluating one's satisfaction with work (Hofmans, De Gieter, & Pepermans, 2013; Kalleberg, 1977). Work values also shape work engagement and other behaviors (e.g., Sortheix, Dietrich, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Thus, it is important to understand the experiences that shape work values early in life and how major historical changes, like economic recessions, affect their development.

Drawing on data from an intergenerational study of parents in their late 30s and their adolescent children, the current study examined whether children's work values reflected parents' employment and financial experiences during the Great Recession. We considered two potential processes of influence based on the social psychological literature as well as a prior study of parental job values in the Great Recession (Johnson et al., 2012). The first, the reinforcement hypothesis, predicts that children value most the desirable features of parents' jobs that are readily available; children attach less value to those job features that their parents have lost or are

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otherwise not within reach. The second, the compensation hypothesis, predicts that when parents' desirable job features erode or become more difficult to obtain, the value that children place on those features rises. This is especially likely to occur when declining parental job circumstances affect the material well-being of workers and their children. This study also examined whether parents' work values shape their children's values, and whether they mediated the influence of parental financial and employment experiences on the next generation's orientations to work.

1. Adolescents' work values

Work values reflect the importance attached to various rewards of working. Although alternative conceptualizations exist, the dominant view classifies work rewards as being either intrinsic or extrinsic. This distinction originates from two classic studies in occupational choice and satisfaction. Rosenberg (1957) distinguished between rewards gained from doing work, which he labeled self-expression rewards, and rewards given in return for work performed, which he labeled extrinsic. Likewise, Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959) distinguished between the intrinsic content of the job and the job situation or context, including rewards given in exchange for work. Accordingly, intrinsic rewards include work that is interesting, challenging, or offering learning opportunities, work that is meaningful to the worker, or work that benefits others or society. In contrast, extrinsic rewards include features such as pay, benefits, job security, prestige, and opportunities for advancement. A recent study supports this classification across a range of datasets from different populations and eras (Johnson, Mortimer, Lee, & Stern, 2007).

Adolescence is a key period for the development of work values. According to classic theories of vocational development (Erikson, 1959; Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951; Super, Starishevsky, Matin, & Jordaan, 1963), young people gradually develop understandings of their own interests, preferences, and capacities, and attempt to find a good "fit" between themselves and the experiences and rewards that can be obtained through work. (For more recent formulations of vocational development, see Fouad, 2007; Porfeli & Vondracek, 2007; Porfeli, Hartung, & Vondracek, 2008). Crystallizing occupational values is a central component of this growing self-awareness, which guides the assessment of potential future lines of work (e.g., Davis, 1965; Rosenberg, 1957). In forming their work values and related occupational identities, adolescents draw from their own experiences, as they are exposed to various tasks and subject matter in school, take on volunteer activities, or participate in paid work, as well as the experiences of parents, relatives, and other significant adults.

Adolescents may be considered more "vocationally mature" when their values and preferences surrounding work are clear, guiding purposeful planning, the mobilization of effort, and the selection of post-secondary educational programs and early jobs (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). In contrast, uncertainty and ambivalence about vocational goals leads to floundering in the school-to-work transition (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Staff, Harris, Sabates, & Briddell, 2010). Given these processes, it is not surprising to find that work values measured during high school exhibit short- and long-term connections to key achievement-related outcomes during and after the transition to adulthood, including educational attainment (e.g., Chow, Krahn & Galambos, 2014) and both pay and intrinsic rewards in later jobs (e.g., Johnson & Monserud, 2012; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979). Stability of intrinsic and extrinsic values is fairly high, though it is important to note that stability strengthens with age at least through the 20s (Jin & Rounds, 2012; Johnson, 2001).

Families are one of the most important contexts of value development (Bengtson, 1975), and while cohort effects and other factors create some dissimilarity in parents' and children's work values, they remain linked. Focusing specifically on the value of self-direction, Kohn, Slomeznski, and Schoenbach (1986) found a significant relationship between parents' and children's values. Similarly, Mannheim (1988) reports a significant parent-child association in the evaluation of earnings, but not in the importance attached to social status and mobility. Ryu and Mortimer (1996) report positive associations between parents' and adolescent children's extrinsic and intrinsic work values, though the pattern differs somewhat across mother/father and son/daughter dyads.

2. Parents' work and adolescents' values

Over the last several decades, much attention has been given to the influence of parents' work experience on children's and adolescents' development and well-being (e.g., Augustine, 2014; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994), including their vocational development (Mortimer & Finch, 1996; Vondracek, Lerner, & MacLean, 1986; Zhao, Lim, & Teo, 2012). Adolescents' work values are thought to develop in ways that reflect their parents' positions in the occupational structure. According to a model developed first by Kohn and Schooler (1983), parents' job conditions shape parents' work values and child-rearing goals and behaviors, which then influence children's work values. Although this hypothetical model is rarely assessed in total (for an exception see Ryu & Mortimer, 1996), key linkages have received empirical support. Parental work characteristics shape parents' values and child-rearing behavior (Kohn & Schooler, 1983) as well as children's work values in adolescence and young adulthood (Galambos & Sears, 1998; Mortimer & Kumka, 1982). Correspondence between parents' and children's work values has likewise been documented, as described above.

In Kohn and Schooler's model, workers value more highly those rewarding work conditions that they experience, while the value placed on other job features is lower. In other words, being in a high paying or secure job with little opportunity for creativity or self-expression would support the maintenance or growth of extrinsic values, but erode intrinsic values. Numerous longitudinal studies, taking into account the selection processes that lead workers to choose jobs reflecting their values, support this "reinforcement and accentuation" perspective (Daehlen, 2007; Johnson, 2001; Lindsay & Knox, 1984; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979). Extending this model to the next generation, we would expect that children learn values that correspond to those of their parents. Parents communicate their values to their children, explicitly guiding their vocational development through rewarding and punishing behavior in line

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