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Does family experience influence political beliefs? Relation between interparental conflict perceptions and political efficacy in late adolescence

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A B S T R A C T

The study examined the relation between adolescents' interparental conflict perceptions and their political efficacy regarding local issues. Longitudinal data (age 15 and 17) from 444 adolescents were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results showed that young people experiencing frequent interparental conflict reported an increase in depressive mood during late adolescence, which was associated with lower level of political efficacy. Moreover, adolescents who felt more efficacious when dealing with fighting parents felt more efficacious in local politics, even when controlling for personality traits and depressive mood. One possible explanation is that family perceptions generalize to politics because both contexts share certain similar features. Our results underscore that also seemingly nonpolitical experiences can matter in adolescents' civic and political development.

Common experience, as well as the results of many studies, show that people who feel able to influence their social environment also engage more in public issues (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). In other words, political efficacy, understood as a persons' belief that they can influence the social system (Bandura, 1997), predicts various forms of civic activity (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Despite its importance, we know much less about how political efficacy originates, i.e. why some young people feel efficacious while others do not (Beaumont, 2010). If we take a closer look at political efficacy, we can see that it consists of two interrelated beliefs: an assessment of personal capabilities and resources, and an assessment of the openness of a social system to change (Bandura, 1997). Both beliefs are formed through personal experience with the social system, such as participation in civic organizations and other political actions (Bandura, 1997; Beaumont, 2010; Zimmerman, 1990). However, young people do not have as many opportunities as adults to engage politically. Therefore, we ask whether adolescents' political efficacy also develops in other contexts. Beaumont (2011) suggests that processes fostering political efficacy in youth may occur in informal setting, such as families, but she does not focus in depth on these processes. We suppose that some aspects of family life have features that are similar to politics, which causes that cognitive schemata, formed in the family, generalize and affect political efficacy. Since local politics is closer to adolescents' everyday lives than politics on a national or global level (Císař, 2008; McAdam, Sampson, Weffer, & MacIndoe, 2005; Youniss et al., 2002), we focus on that particular kind of political efficacy.

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Adolescents' perceptions of their own competence and the controllability of the environment are influenced by how they perceive interparental relations, and how they interpret parental mutual communication and behavior (Grych & Fincham, 1993; Rudolph, Kurlakowsky, & Conley, 2001). Special importance is attached to appraisals of conflicts between parents. Grych and Fincham (1990) described a cognitive-contextual framework to delineate the processes that associate marital conflict with offsprings' development. This theoretical perspective accentuates the meaning of interparental conflict for young people as a key mechanism. Adolescents form cognitive schemata that represent the typical course of interparental conflict and their personal role in such conflicts. These schemata not only affect adolescents' expectations concerning future parental disagreements, but may also affect their perceptions and behavior in broader social relationships (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001).

Adolescents experiencing higher levels of interparental conflict in their families might be less confident that they can influence political issues in their communities. First, adolescents' repeated exposure to negative stressful events, such as family conflict, can lead to chronic and generalized self-blame and deficits in perceived control of external events, which turn into depressive mood (Kerig, 1998; O'Donnell, Moreau, Cardemil, & Pollastri, 2010; Richmond & Stocker, 2003). Cognitive theories of depression imply that depressive thinking consists in the pervasive expectation that negative events will occur from uncontrollable forces and that a person cannot do anything to affect them (Abela & Hankin, 2008; Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Beck, 1983; Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986). Consequently, young people with depression feel helpless and incompetent in social situations (Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1992; Whitton, Larson, & Hauser, 2008), and have lower social self-efficacy (Muris, 2002). Therefore, we expect that person's political efficacy (i. e., belief in influence on one particular social context) will reflect these generalized schemata. Second, adolescents from families with high interparental conflict are more likely to acquire avoidant coping style, which means that their general reaction to problems or interpersonal conflicts is to avoid them (Davies & Forman, 2002; Michael, Torres, & Seemann, 2007; Nicolotti, El-Sheikh, & Whitson, 2003). These young people tend to avoid thinking about or doing something about community problems; thus, we can expect them to have a low political efficacy that is closely associated with awareness of public issues (Zimmerman, 1995). In short, young people from families with high interparental conflict can have low political efficacy because they have developed high depressive mood and/or avoidant coping style.

Furthermore, adolescents' belief that they can influence political issues in their communities can be directly linked to their perceived ability to influence negative events within the family. One of the basic experiences that adolescents make when facing interparental conflicts involves their ability to negotiate with fighting parents, and their ability to influence the course of those conflicts (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). In related literature, this perception is sometimes called 'coping efficacy,' but we will refer to as interparental conflict efficacy, in order to avoid any confusion with the concept of coping styles. Research indicates that efficacy beliefs regarding particular contexts or activities can generalize to other contexts (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, Adams, & Beyer, 1977; Brody, Hatfield, & Spalding, 1988; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989; Weitlauf, Cervone, Smith, & Wright, 2001). Thus, people who learn that they are efficacious in one area can start to feel efficacious in other areas, as well. However, both contexts must demand the same or similar skills; otherwise the generalization will not occur. We argue that efficacy related schemata formed in the course of interparental conflict can affect adolescents' political efficacy since family and political environments share certain similar features. Foremost, both environments are characterized by hierarchy, occasional conflicts and a somewhat subordinate position for a young person. Gniewosz, Noack, and Buhl (2009) found, in their research on political trust, that family experiences generalize to politics. According to them, rigorous authorities in close family relationships undermine the development of trust in the institutions of society and in the representatives of the political system. According to additional research that is not explicitly related to politics, adolescents with negative family perceptions develop general negative feelings about contexts controlled by the authority, which makes them less willing to spend time in authority-controlled places and organizations (Kerr, Stattin, Biesecker, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2003; Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007). Therefore, we expect that the development of interparental conflict efficacy will be shown to be associated with enhanced political efficacy.

In addition, interparental conflict efficacy can be undermined by extreme and permanent hostility between parents, as adolescents learn that they cannot do anything to positively influence parental conflicts (Buehler, Lange, & Franck, 2007). Thus, we expect that interparental conflict efficacy can be yet another link between perceived frequency of interparental conflicts and political efficacy.

When assessing the association between interparental conflict perceptions and political efficacy, personality traits need to be considered. Personality traits influence how adolescents perceive their parents; especially, higher levels of neuroticism can cause a negative distortion of adolescents' parental perceptions (Millikan, Wamboldt, & Bihun, 2002). Additionally, personality traits are known to influence various political perceptions (Mondak & Halperin, 2008), whereas political efficacy is associated mainly with high extraversion and openness (Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that adolescents endowed with certain personality dispositions perceive themselves to be efficacious both in parental conflict and in politics, although there may be no real association between these two perceptions.

To sum up, we ask whether the way in which adolescents perceive interparental conflicts predicts how they perceive political efficacy in their communities. Specifically, we expect that perceived interparental conflict frequency and interparental conflict efficacy will matter. Concerning perceived conflict frequency, we hypothesize that its association with political efficacy is negative and indirect, due to: (1) more depressive mood; (2) more avoidant coping style; and (3) lower interparental conflict efficacy. Next, interparental conflict efficacy is hypothesized to have a direct positive association with