



Don't trust anyone over 30: Parental legitimacy as a mediator between parenting style and changes in delinquent behavior over time

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ABSTRACT

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Both law and society scholars and developmental psychologists have focused on the legitimacy of authority figures, although in different domains (police versus parents). The purpose of the current research is to bridge these two fields by examining the relations among parenting style (i.e., authoritarian, authoritative, permissive), the perception of parental legitimacy, and changes in delinquency over time. It is hypothesized that parental legitimacy mediates the relation between parenting style and future delinquent behavior. Middle school and high school students completed questionnaires three times over a period of 18 months. Parenting style and delinquent behavior were measured at time 1, parental legitimacy at time 2, and delinquency again at time 3. The results show that authoritative parenting was positively related to parental legitimacy, while authoritarian parenting was negatively associated with parental legitimacy. Furthermore, parental legitimacy was negatively associated with future delinquency. Structural equation modeling indicated that parental legitimacy mediated the relation between parenting styles and changes in delinquency over the 18-month time period. The implications for parenting style and parental legitimacy affecting delinquent behavior are discussed.

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As they grow older, adolescents begin to exert their autonomy by defining more areas of their lives as outside of parental control and authority (Smetana, 2002). Consequently, parents may feel that they are sometimes losing the battle in exerting their influence over their children and enforcing rules. One factor that may aid parents in this endeavor is the extent to which their children perceive them as legitimate authority figures. Indeed, research by law and society scholars has shown that adolescents' perception of the legitimacy of the legal system has a direct effect on their delinquent behavior (Fagan & Tyler, 2005). However, legal scholars have only examined the legitimacy of legal and government authorities (e.g., police), making it unclear if their findings generalize to authorities outside of the legal system, such as parents. Developmental psychologists, on the other hand, have examined the effects of legitimacy of parental authorities on compliance, but have largely ignored research by legal scholars examining the relation between the perceptions of legitimacy and delinquency (e.g., Darling, Cumsille, & Martínez, 2007). No researcher has examined the relation between parental legitimacy and delinquent behavior.

Additionally, although developmental researchers highlight individual variation in when and where adolescents view their parents as legitimate authorities, relatively little is known about what factors create this individual variation (Darling

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et al., 2007). The styles parents use to rear their children (Baumrind, 1967, 1971, 1991) may potentially have powerful influences on adolescents' perceptions of parental authority, although these influences have not been examined empirically. Moreover, while researchers have found some evidence that parenting styles influence adolescents' engagement in delinquent behavior (e.g., Simons, Simons, Burt, Brody, & Cutrona, 2005), little is known about the mechanisms that mediate this relation. Perceptions of parental legitimacy may not only be influenced by parenting styles, but also may be a mechanism by which parenting styles affect adolescent delinquency. However, this has not yet been investigated.

This is the first study to address specifically if parenting styles influence adolescents' beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority and if those perceptions affect adolescent reports of delinquent behavior. Our primary goal was to examine if adolescents' perceptions of parental legitimacy mediated the relation between parenting style and future delinquent behavior. To assess this relation, we developed a measure of parental legitimacy based on a measure of legal legitimacy developed by legal scholars (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). We then tested if parental legitimacy mediated the relation between parenting styles and *changes* in delinquent behavior over an 18-month time period in a sample of middle school and high school students.

Legitimacy

Definitions and conceptions of legitimacy abound within past research (Jost & Major, 2001). For the purposes of the present paper, the concept of legitimacy is defined as a psychological property of an individual that leads others to perceive his or her authority as appropriate, proper, and just (Tyler, 2006a, 2006b). Within this framework, legitimacy perceptions have two primary components: the extent to which an individual trusts an authority and the extent to which he or she feels an obligation to obey the directives of that authority (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

Legitimacy is an important property for any authority figure to possess. Unlike an illegitimate authority, those that are perceived to be legitimate do not have to rely on instrumental control of rewards and punishments to control behavior (Tyler, 2006a). While such a strategy can be effective, it is costly and inefficient as a relatively large amount of resources are needed to ensure that people are obeying the rules and being rewarded (or punished) appropriately. Instead, authorities can exert their control by fostering legitimacy among those connected to them. Ultimately, authorities become legitimate when society has judged that they have a right or are entitled to obedience through some type of value system. Once established, legitimacy is maintained to a large extent through social norms and socialization pressures. Thus, individuals are more likely to follow the rules of a legitimate authority, even when that authority is not physically present (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This allows an authority to direct his or her resources elsewhere, rather than using them to ensure that rules are not being broken.

Research within the legal system has shown the effectiveness of authorities perceived as legitimate. For example, when individuals view the police as legitimate, they are more likely to show support for the institution of policing (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003), cooperate with police (Tyler, 2006b), notify them when laws are broken (Tyler, 2006b), and not violate the law (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Adolescents that believe the police are legitimate report less engagement in crime during the previous year (Fagan & Tyler, 2005). However, legal scholars who have focused on adolescents' perceptions of legitimacy (e.g., Fagan & Piquero, 2007) have ignored the legitimacy of parents, important authority figures in the life of adolescents. Because of this lack of research, it is also not entirely clear what parenting factors will promote parental legitimacy. Furthermore, there has been relatively little research examining specifically how adolescents' perceptions of the legitimacy of any type of authority affect their engagement in delinquent behavior (see Fagan & Piquero, 2007; Fagan & Tyler, 2005 for important exceptions).

Legitimacy of parental authority

Much of the developmental psychology research on parental authority has tended to focus on where and when adolescents will view parental authority as legitimate. Most of this research has shown that adolescents' perception of parental legitimacy is domain specific (Milnitsky-Sapiro, Turiel, & Nucci, 2006; Smetana & Daddis, 2002). The decision to give parents legitimate authority is dependent upon the particular issue in question. For example, Tisak (1986) found that adolescents were more likely to perceive parental rules pertaining to stealing as more legitimate than rules concerning household chores or friendships. More recently, Darling, Cumsille, and Peña-Alampay (2005) found that most adolescents perceived parents as legitimate within moral domains (e.g., doing physical or psychological harm); however, there was greater variability in legitimacy perceptions within personal domains (e.g., choice of friends or use of free time). Similar to past research on legal authorities, when adolescents do view their parents as legitimate within a given domain and feel an obligation to obey parental rules within that domain, they are less likely to break those rules (Darling et al., 2007).

Although developmental psychologists have examined when adolescents will view parental authority as legitimate, there has been relatively few examinations of how these perceptions impact adolescents' engagement in rule-violating behavior within a legal context. For example, Darling et al. (2007) primarily focused on behavior violating rules at home rather than behavior violating public laws (i.e., delinquency). Moreover, no researchers have examined if the perceptions of parental legitimacy impact changes in delinquent behavior over time. Finally, although it is well established that there are individual differences in adolescent perceptions of parental legitimacy, relatively little is known about how these differences develop or what factors influence adolescent perceptions (Darling et al., 2007; Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

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