



Maternal support and deviance among rural adolescents: The mediating role of self-esteem

Dan Liu, Albert J. Ksinan, Alexander T. Vazsonyi*

University of Kentucky, USA



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Supportive mothering buffers against adolescent deviance, but the precise mechanisms underlying this relationship are poorly understood. The current investigation tested the extent to which self-esteem mediated the maternal support-deviance link and whether it varied by adolescent age and sex.

Methods: Data were collected from 911 middle and high school students in the rural South (53.6% female, *Mage* = 14.70 years). Main model tests were completed in SEM.

Results: Results indicated that maternal support and self-esteem were positively associated and negatively to deviance, and that self-esteem mediated the support-deviance link. These associations did not differ by adolescent age. However, moderating effects by sex were significant, where maternal support had a greater effect on girls' self-esteem, while self-esteem had a greater effect on boys' deviance.

Conclusions: Findings provide some evidence of how maternal support is associated with a positive self-concept that in turn decreases the likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviors.

Juvenile courts in the United States handled an estimated 1,058,500 juvenile delinquency cases in 2013, which has more than doubled since 1960 (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2015). Although the total number of juvenile delinquency cases has declined since 1985, delinquency caseloads involving drug offenses increased 83%, person offenses increased 51%, and public order crimes increased 40% (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2015). Considering that official statistics do not include unreported delinquency, we can reasonably assume that the actual numbers are larger, indicating great challenges for improving adolescent development; thus, we need confront and understand which factors are associated with adolescent deviance.

Among all factors, parenting accounts for the most variance in adolescent problem behaviors as compared to other explanatory variables (Hoskins, 2014). Meta-analytic and review studies have found significant links between parenting and adolescent deviance (Hoeve et al., 2009; Hoskins, 2014); more specifically, maternal parenting has been shown to have a greater influence on adolescent deviance than paternal parenting (Arbona & Power, 2003; Craig, 2016; Waizenhofer, Buchanan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2004). However, some aspects of the mothering-adolescent deviance link still require further study. For instance, does this link vary for boys versus girls (Hoeve et al., 2009), or does it change developmentally, across early versus middle adolescence? In addition, explanatory mechanisms underlying the link are rarely explored. Understanding the precise mechanisms underlying the mothering-deviance link will extend our knowledge on the specific underlying processes and will inform both clinical and prevention efforts.

To fill in the above gaps in the literature, the following research goals were developed in the present study: to test how maternal parenting, specifically maternal support, was associated with adolescent deviance; to examine one possible underlying explanatory mechanism or factor, namely self-esteem; and to test whether those links varied developmentally as well as by sex. In addition, the

* Corresponding author. 316 Funkhouser Building, Lexington, KY 40506, USA.

E-mail address: vazsonyi@uky.edu (A.T. Vazsonyi).

present study sought to examine these issues in a sample of youth from a rural developmental context. Although some risk factors are consistent for youth across rural or urban contexts, youth from rural areas have been found to be more likely to enter the juvenile justice system; this calls for greater attention on rural youth (Blackmon, Robison, & Rhodes, 2016).

1. Maternal support and adolescent deviance

1.1. Parental support

Supportive parenting has positive effects on adolescent development and adjustment; specifically, it can promote better school performance and social skills among adolescents and prevent depression and delinquency (Juang & Silbereisen, 1999; Wright & Cullen, 2001). Not only can supportive parenting limit adolescents' initial involvement in deviance, but it can also reduce subsequent deviant behaviors (Wright & Cullen, 2001). On the one hand, positive parental support promotes better adjustment outcomes for adolescents, while a lack of parental support predicts a variety of adolescent problem behaviors, including alcohol use, substance use, delinquency, and externalizing behaviors (e.g., Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Pereyra & Bean, 2017; White & Renk, 2012). Based on the results of a meta-analysis on the parenting-deviance link, negative aspects of parental support, such as neglect or rejection, had the strongest effects among all parenting behaviors on youth and measures of adjustment (Hoeve et al., 2009). Therefore, parental support may be one of the most important targets for interventions on preventing or reducing adolescent deviance.

1.2. Maternal support

Interestingly, although previous studies that focused on general parental support largely showed a significant relationship between parental support and adolescent delinquency (e.g., Juang & Silbereisen, 1999; White & Renk, 2012; Wright & Cullen, 2001), results for the specific maternal support-deviance link are mixed. For example, some studies found that maternal support predicted better adjustment among adolescents and was negatively related to adolescent delinquency (e.g., Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Caldwell, Silverman, Lefforge, & Silver, 2004; Deutsch, Crockett, Wolff, & Russell, 2012), while others failed to do so (e.g., Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Kim & Goto, 2000). As parental support is such an important factor for adolescent deviance and maternal support may account for the majority of parental support (Caldwell et al., 2004), it seems important to further examine the influence of maternal support on deviance. By testing the maternal support-deviance link among rural youth, the present study sought to add to existing literature on understanding the association between maternal support and adolescent deviance. It was hypothesized that maternal support would be negatively associated with adolescent deviance as the majority of previous studies have found.

2. Self-esteem and adolescent deviance

Self-esteem is another factor that has been found to be related to adolescent deviance (e.g., Caldwell, Beutler, Ross, & Silver, 2006; Kort-Butler, 2010; Lee & Lee, 2012; Mason, 2001; Tzeng & Yi, 2013). The growth of self-esteem has been found to be either negatively or positively associated with deviant behaviors, possibly due to cultural differences (Lee & Lee, 2012; Mason, 2001), though this was not a focus of the current study.

The present study sought to test whether self-esteem predicted deviance. Even though Tzeng and Yi (2013) found that the relationship between self-esteem and adolescent deviance was non-linear and that high self-esteem may not be protective against adolescent deviance, self-esteem has been found to be a protective factor of deviance in a number of studies (e.g., Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Mason, 2001; Shek, 2005). Cross-sectionally, low levels of self-esteem are associated with higher levels of aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency in adolescents (Donnellan et al., 2005); longitudinally, the influence of self-esteem during childhood may influence an individual's subsequent development throughout adolescence and even into adulthood (Oshri, Carlson, Kwon, Zeichner, & Wickrama, 2017). In addition, delinquent and non-delinquent youth were found to have different levels of self-esteem, where non-delinquent youth had higher levels of self-esteem (Nair, 2000), indicating the importance of considering self-esteem in the explanation of deviance. Therefore, it was hypothesized that self-esteem would be negatively associated with deviant behaviors.

3. Supportive parenting and adolescent self-esteem

On the one hand, self-esteem is associated with deviance; on the other hand, parenting is closely associated with self-esteem and well-being. Adolescents with warm and supportive parents usually have higher levels of self-esteem (e.g., Boer & Tranent, 2013; Martínez & García, 2007; Yan, Zhang, & Cui, 2016). Even in the face of life difficulties, such as financial disadvantages, good parenting might still be able to promote positive psychological adjustment in adolescents (Shek, 2002).

3.1. Maternal support and adolescent self-esteem

Support, particularly maternal support, is an important component of positive parenting (Caldwell et al., 2004). However, findings of studies concerning the association between maternal support and adolescent self-esteem are mixed. Caldwell et al. (2004) found no relation between familial emotional support (mostly maternal emotional support) and adolescent self-esteem. Other studies found that maternal support promotes better self-esteem in adolescents (e.g., Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003; Boer & Tranent,

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