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Pathways from poor family relationships in adolescence to economic adversity in mid-adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have found that troubled childhood family conditions have long-term detrimental effects on a person's economic situation in adulthood. However, the mechanisms behind these effects are unclear. The aim of this study was to examine the associations between poor adolescent family relationships and the economic adversity in mid-adulthood and whether different adversities in early adulthood mediate this association.

Participants of a Finnish cohort study at 16 years in 1983 were followed up when aged 22, 32 and 42 (N = 1334). Family relationships were measured according to adolescents' perceived lack of emotional parental support (e.g. My mother is close to me (reversed)), lack of parental support in the individuation process and poor atmosphere at home. We analysed the direct effects of poor family relationships at age 16 on the economic adversity at age 42 and also indirect effects via various adversities at ages 22 and 32. The examined adversities were poor somatic and mental health, lack of an intimate relationship, low education and heavy drinking.

Poor adolescent family relationships were associated with economic adversity in mid-adulthood. For women, poor relationships were associated with their economic adversity (42y) through poor mental health and low education in early adulthood. For men, the effect was transmitted via low education, although this was not the case after adjusting for school achievement in adolescence.

The quality of family relationships in adolescence is associated with an individual's economic situation well into mid-adulthood in women. Moreover, this association was not explained by family structure and parental SEP in adolescence. Early promotion of parent-child interaction, as well as health and education of individuals from troubled family conditions, might reduce economic inequality in adulthood.

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1. Introduction

The life course perspective suggests that adversities in adult life often originate in previous life phases – as early as in the foetal period – in childhood and especially in poor family conditions (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Mayer, 2009; Shanahan, Mortimer, & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2016; Uhlenberg and Mueller, 2003). Childhood conditions may have a long-term impact on adult wellbeing directly as well as via various pathways (Kuh, Ben-Shlomo, Lynch, Hallqvist, & Power, 2003). These paths are like chain reactions, where negative experiences lead to other negative experiences and positive experiences help to gain more

positive experiences (Merton, 1968; Rutter, 1989). This sequence of linked exposures has also been referred to as a chain of risk model (Kuh et al., 2003). It is not possible to affect adverse life paths, unless the mechanisms behind these links between early life conditions and adult adversities are understood properly. The present study aims to examine this issue by exploring how chains of risks develop from poor family relationships in adolescence to adversities in early adulthood and to economic adversity in mid-adulthood.

Family conditions in childhood and adolescence have been seen as being one of the most important factors affecting a person's life course (Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2003). Although family conditions are not the only thing affecting the life course, they are nevertheless one of our primary social environments, forming a basic foundation for future development. Previous research has

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mainly examined family conditions from three perspectives: family structure (also status), family resources and family relationships (also interactions/dynamics) (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010; Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2003). Childhood family structure has usually been studied as household composition, while family resources include economic (e.g. income, wealth and housing) and social capital (e.g. knowledge, information, influence and support from social networks) referring to a person's socioeconomic position (SEP) more generally. In this study we focus on adolescent family relationships, which in previous studies have usually been examined as the quality and characteristics of relationships between family members and parental practices. Moreover, family relationships have been measured in various ways and the quality of these relationships is based on several aspects of these relationships (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010; e.g. Maccoby, 1992; Walters & Stinnett, 1971). These aspects can be, for example, the perceived intimacy of relationships, frequency of conflicts, shared time and the feeling of mutual trust and acceptance, that are closely related to perceived social support in the family. Especially lack of emotional support (e.g. lack of provision of empathy, love, trust and caring (House, 1981)) can be associated with poor quality family relationships. In summary family relationships refer to interaction between family members and they are an important component in family conditions. Because child-parent relationships are often being renegotiated in adolescence (Steinberg, 2001) and transient conflicts with parents are common (D'Angelo & Omar, 2003), measuring relationships should not be based on a single indicator. Furthermore, having one problem in a family relationship does not necessarily lead to poor consequences if the environment is otherwise supportive, but several problems compound the risk (e.g. Chapman et al., 2004). Only by measuring problems in family relationships in adolescence more holistically, a more comprehensive understanding of the family relationships can be attained.

The effects of childhood family resources (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001; Corcoran, 1995; Huurre, Aro, Rahkonen, & Komulainen, 2006; Sirmö, Martikainen, & Kauppinen, 2013) and structure (Biblarz, Raftery, & Bucur, 1997; East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2006; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008) on a person's subsequent SEP have been widely studied. Pathways from family relationships to adult socioeconomic attainment, on the other hand, have not been studied as thoroughly. Although there is a broad range of literature on the association between child-parent relationships and wellbeing in childhood (Ranson & Urichuk, 2008), far fewer studies have examined the long-term effects of these relationships. Mainly these few long-term studies on family relationships have focused on mental health outcomes (Weich, Patterson, Shaw, & Stewart-Brown, 2009), but there is some evidence to suggest that if the quality of the family relationships is poor, then the child cannot make use of the resources that the parents have (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Coleman, 1988).

While there is evidence to suggest that the transitions from adolescence to adulthood have become longer than in previous generations (Settersten & Ray, 2010), adolescence still remains an important life phase since many transitions take place during that time (Shanahan, 2000). Because the transition to adulthood includes many changes, the risk of adversities is present in several dimensions of life, even though usually the transition to adulthood goes well (Côté, 2014; Mortimer & Moen, 2016). In adolescence, a person starts to make choices regarding their education and employment and start to engage in romantic relationships (Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). Adolescents also begin to make life-style choices on their own and, for example, make decisions about whether or not to engage in risky behaviours such as alcohol use. However, adolescence and early adulthood are still a time of experimenting with different adult roles and choices made are not

necessarily the ones that are adopted for life. For example although heavy drinking is common, it usually decreases when reaching the later years of early adulthood (Kuntsche, Rehm, & Gmel, 2004). Breaks from parental control and trust define family relationships in adolescence, and conflicts often may increase in parent-child relationships (Shanahan, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2007). Even though adolescents gain more independence and the influence of peers and the media increases, family and parents remain an important role in the lives of adolescents; usually they still value parental support in the several life transitions they face during this period of life (Aaltonen & Karvonen, 2015; Steinberg, 2001).

1.1. Pathways from family relationships in childhood and adolescence to adulthood economic situation

Family relationships in childhood and adolescence can be associated with an adult economic situation in various ways, i.e. different adversities could mediate the association. Several studies have attempted to trace different aspects of childhood family conditions to adult wellbeing, and regardless of the definition of wellbeing, various pathways have been suggested that follow a quite similar set of dimensions of life. These dimensions include health, social relations, education/working life and risky behaviours (Due et al., 2011; Layard, Clark, Cornaglia, Powdthavee, & Vernoit, 2014; Uhlenberg & Mueller, 2003; Wickrama, Simons, & Baltimore, 2012; Zielinski, 2009). Multidimensional approach to adversities suggests that adversities can cut across any of these dimensions of life (Callander, Schofield, & Shrestha, 2012; Rutter & Madge, 1976) and in early adulthood these adversities can shape the association between childhood and adulthood. Evidence of each of the pathways identified is briefly outlined below focusing on family relationships as a starting point for chains of risks.

1.1.1. Socioeconomic path

The influence of family conditions on cognitive ability, education and subsequent educational level is well documented, especially concerning family resources and structure (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Conger et al., 2012; Huurre, Aro et al., 2006). Also the importance of family relationships has been recognised (Caspi, Moffitt, Entner Wright, & Silva, 1998; O'Connor & Scott, 2007). For example, a lack of parental support has been found to be associated with a poorer educational attainment (Anderson & Hammen, 1993; Rothon, Goodwin, & Stansfeld, 2012). Educational achievement predicts subsequent income level, albeit cultural variation and other factors blur the effect (Autor, 2014; Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne, 2001; Harmon, Walker, & Westergaard-Nielson, 2001). Although it has been found that the pathway from childhood family to adult SEP is most often transmitted through a person's own education (e.g. Schoon, 2008), this does not explain the association entirely (Kuh & Wadsworth, 1991). Indeed, while parental support is significant when an adolescent makes decisions about future education, parents also support their children in many other dimensions of life (Ranson & Urichuk, 2008), which will affect the subsequent socioeconomic attainment. These other dimensions of life are discussed in the following paragraphs.

1.1.2. Health path

Several studies have found an association between poor family relationships and subsequent poor health, which can be viewed as a combination of physical and mental aspects (Amato, 1994; Landstedt, Hammarström, & Winefield, 2015; O'Connor & Scott, 2007). It has been hypothesised that social experiences affect biological systems. Poor family relationships can cause a chronic

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