



# Agentic personality as mediator of social capital on developmental outcomes in the transition to adulthood: Evidence from Shanghai, China



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon a sample of 1153 young people in Shanghai, China, this study investigates how agentic personality mediates between social capital embedded in a range of social contexts (family, friendship, association, and linking connection) and developmental outcomes during the transition to adulthood. The results of a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis provide a good fit for the sample as a whole. The overall findings support the hypotheses that a higher level of agentic personality, including resilience, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, is associated with higher levels of developmental outcomes. Agentic personality also mediates the effects of family, friendship, associational, and linking social capital on developmental outcomes. Family social capital is predictive of university students' identity achievement and academic achievement, but not of their mental health. Linking social capital is only predictive of identity achievement. Unexpectedly, friendship social capital and associational social capital are predictive of a lower level of academic achievement and mental health, respectively, despite their positive influences on all three developmental outcomes through their significant effects on agentic personality. The study provides empirical support for the importance of social capital in promoting young people's transition to adulthood. Implications for theory, practice, and policy are also discussed.

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## Introduction

Transitions that occur between life stages bring instability as the person passes through (Hogan & Astone, 1986). Individuals are faced with more transitions and life decisions in late adolescence and young adulthood than in other developmental stages of life (Capsi, 2002), particularly in terms of a move away from one's family of origin and established networks (Lenz, 2001). Moreover, young people's transition to adulthood manifests itself with many new characteristics, such as more extended, complex, risky, individualized, as well as polarized (Jones, 2005).

Captured in the midst of deficient institutional support and confronted with salient developmental tasks, young people in China are experiencing the most precarious period in their lives. Higher education in Mainland China has been transformed from an elite model to a universal model since the expansion of university enrollment in 1999. It was reported that China has

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approximately 23.09 million college students (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, NBS, 2012). The number of enrollees has continued to grow on a 3% basis annually and has already reached 6.82 million (NBS, 2012). They have to adapt to more challenging lifestyles, which undergo significant changes in post-industrialized societies. The previously upheld community-oriented policies and production-based lifestyles are being replaced by market-oriented policies and consumption-based lifestyles (Heath & Potter, 2004), which, in turn, have led to the decline of intergenerational social capital, or social decapitalization (Putnam, 2000). It remains doubtful whether striving to climb the ladder of higher education will result in enhanced employability and a smoother transition to adult roles.

Shanghai is the largest and one of the most rapidly developing cities in Mainland China, attracting many young people for higher education. However, the accelerating economic and social changes evident in Shanghai today have caused much confusion among recent cohorts of students (Xu, 2003; Zhang, 2003). Acknowledging and capitalizing on the challenges as well as opportunities may provide a vehicle for formulating a more comprehensive, integrative perspective on youth transition to adulthood. The present research, based in Shanghai, was thus carried out to examine the dynamism between social capital, agentic personality, and developmental outcomes in the life transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Adopting a developmental approach and applying the multidimensional concept of social capital, this study placed Chinese young people in transaction with the environment in an ever-diversifying set of developmental issues in order to examine how they navigate through adulthood. The study also investigated the respective roles of social capital embedded in various dimensions, as suggested by overseas studies that social ties change during late adolescence and early adulthood. Specifically, parental influence decreases while that of peers plays a progressively more relevant role in adolescents' lives (Bucx, van Wel, & Knijn, 2012; Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). The overarching question this research considered was how the effects of social capital (i.e., family, friendship, association, and linking) on developmental outcomes are mediated by agentic personality.

## Literature review and hypotheses

### *Conceptualizing developmental outcomes, social capital, and agentic personality*

Developmental tasks of late adolescence and young adulthood are interwoven with achievement (e.g., education and career), affiliation (e.g., establishing connections with peers and romantic partners), and identity (e.g., adult identity, occupational identity, community identity) (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004; Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004). Three variables, namely, identity achievement, academic achievement, and mental health, are thereby selected as predominant developmental outcomes pertinent to university students' social, cognitive, and emotional development, respectively.

Social capital, enjoying a remarkable rise to prominence ever since the 1990s, is broadly defined as social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals (Schuller, Baron, & Field, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). A sizeable body of literature has identified the major social ties through which adolescents acquire social capital: relationships with family members, friendship networks, and connections to institutional agents (e.g., administrative staff, other caring adults in the community) (Cauce, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1996; Mullis, Hill, & Readdick, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These networks are significant to adolescents' sense of belonging and can help them negotiate their way to adulthood. Thus, the social capital framework is categorized as four dimensions: family social capital, friendship social capital, associational social capital, and linking social capital.

Agentic personality refers to a repertoire of individual qualities for cognitively understanding and behaviorally negotiating obstacles and opportunities encountered throughout an individualized life course (Côté, 1997, 2000). It comprises many proactive psychological traits such as self-esteem, internal locus of control, ego strength, and so on (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). This construct is operationalized as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience in this study.

### *Agentic personality as a mediator*

Recent literature on agentic personality tends to harness a dynamic and systemic perspective, viewing the development of young people as influenced by a series of risk and protective factors in their various social contexts (Werner & Smith, 1992). Social relationships acquired through transactions with the environment can play a role in either facilitating or hindering attempts to behave in an agentic manner (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Therefore, it is beneficial to identify the risks and protective factors that might impede or promote agency and developmental outcomes (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999). Characteristics of family processes and wider social environments (e.g., school, community) that are implicated in the development of agency have been delineated (Masten & Garmezy, 1985). Parental care, support, and communication (Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986), as well as participation in structured extracurricular activities (Gilman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004; Li & Zhang, 2012) were found to be strongly related to adolescents' self-esteem. Competent peer friendships (Doll, Jew, & Green, 1998) and supportive relationships with institutional agents such as teachers (Crosnoe & Glen, 2004) also serve as protective factors of adolescents' resilience and self-efficacy.

Empirical research has verified that social relationships not only affect individual qualities (Back et al., 2011) but also contribute to youth development directly (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) or indirectly through the mediation of agentic personality (Floyd & McKenna, 2003). First, agentic personality is found to be effective in promoting college-to-career transition (Grier-

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