



Socioeconomic status and life satisfaction in Chinese adolescents: Analysis of self-esteem as a mediator and optimism as a moderator



Wu Chen, Geng-Feng Niu, Dong-Jing Zhang, Cui-Ying Fan, Yuan Tian, Zong-Kui Zhou *

^a Key Laboratory of Adolescent Cyberpsychology and Behavior (CCNU), Ministry of Education, Wuhan 430079, China

^b School of Psychology, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, China

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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that family socioeconomic status is an important determinant of people's life satisfaction, in that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are typically less satisfied with their life than the rich. But little is known about the mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying this relation. The present study examined the mediation effect of adolescents' self-esteem in the association between socioeconomic status and life satisfaction, and whether this mediating process was moderated by optimism. A sample of 668 Chinese adolescents (mean age = 14.53 years, $SD = 1.81$) completed anonymous questionnaires regarding SES, life satisfaction, self-esteem and optimism. Multiple regression analyses revealed that the association between SES and life satisfaction was mediated by self-esteem. Moreover, the mediating effect of self-esteem was moderated by optimism, with the mediating effect being stronger for individuals with low optimism than for those with high optimism. These findings can be beneficial to our understanding of how and when SES impacts adolescents' well-being. Moreover, the present study highlighted the importance of using the organism-environment interaction to explore potential protective factors for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. A person cannot choose where he comes from (e.g., low socioeconomic status), but can choose whom he wants to be (e.g., optimist).

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1. Introduction

As an important construct in positive psychology, life satisfaction can be defined as an individual's overall appraisals of the quality of his or her life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). A growing number of researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of life satisfaction on adolescents' positive adjustment (e.g., Salmela-Aro & Tuominen-Soini, 2010). Despite an unprecedented rate of economic growth, the life satisfaction of Chinese over the last two decades has shown no change or a declining trend. The burden of worsening life satisfaction in China has fallen chiefly on the lowest socioeconomic groups (Easterlin, Morgan, Switek, & Wang, 2012). Family SES is an important determinant of people's life satisfaction, in that the rich are typically more satisfied with their life than the poor (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Though many studies have investigated the relationship between SES and life satisfaction, the underlying mediating mechanism (i.e., how SES relates to life satisfaction) and moderating mechanism (i.e., when the mediating process is most potent) need to be examined (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

Answers to these questions are essential for a better understanding of how to solve the development and adaptation problems of socioeconomically disadvantaged persons and ultimately to promote people's well-being. This study investigated the effect of SES on adolescents' life satisfaction, tested a moderated mediation model in which SES is indirectly related to life satisfaction through self-esteem, and tested whether this indirect association is moderated by optimism.

1.1. Self-esteem as a mediator

SES not only has direct effects but also has mediated effects on well-being (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Though the SES literature offers a variety of proposed mechanisms (e.g., parenting) linking SES and people's well-being, most hypothesized mechanisms have not been adequately explored (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), especially in terms of individual level factors (e.g., self-esteem) as mediators (Chen & Miller, 2013). Self-esteem, being considered a fundamental human concern, may serve as a mediating factor between SES and life satisfaction. SES, as the determinant of society's primary view of the individual (Twenge & Campbell, 2002), may influence self-esteem, as the individual's view of self, and self-esteem may go a step further to influence life satisfaction, as the individual's view of life.

On the one hand, according to the social indicator or salience model (Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978), low SES families experience more

* Corresponding author at: Key Laboratory of Adolescent Cyberpsychology and Behavior (CCNU), Ministry of Education, Wuhan 430079, China.

E-mail address: zhouzk@mail.ccnu.edu.cn (Z.-K. Zhou).

threatening and uncontrollable life events and stress (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), and socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents are at higher risk of uncertainty, powerlessness, and low self-esteem (McLoyd, 1998). In addition, discrimination is a common experience for people living in poverty. Many people unfairly link poverty with laziness and other negative traits, and these stereotypes or prejudices may have detrimental effects on the self-esteem of people with low SES (Herman, Bi, Borden, & Reinke, 2012). Meanwhile, according to the sociometer theory of self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), social exclusion that arises from such stereotypes or prejudices is another risk factor of self-esteem. Actually, some European communities even directly defined poverty as “social exclusion” (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012).

Moreover, compared with children, adolescents are more sensitive to the gap between poor and rich because of the rapid development of social and self-consciousness in adolescence, with the detrimental effects of low SES on self-esteem being more evident for adolescents than children (McLoyd et al., 2009). Rosenberg and Pearlman (1978) examined the relationship between social class and self-esteem in a sample of children aged 8–18, and the results indicated that social class had no association with self-esteem for younger children, but a modest association for adolescents. A meta-analysis has also documented that lower SES individuals report lower self-esteem, but the effect size is very small in young children and increases substantially during adolescence (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). Thus, low SES is a predictive factor for low self-esteem, especially for adolescents.

On the other hand, self-esteem is a determinant of mental health and well-being (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012). A wide and diverse literature that spans disciplines and theoretical perspectives suggests that high self-esteem promotes relationship satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), positive affect (Orth et al., 2012), and life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995). According to Diener and Diener (1995), both self-esteem and life satisfaction represent general evaluations: self-esteem reflects a person's evaluations of himself or herself, while life satisfaction involves an individual's evaluation of his or her life as a whole. Importantly, evaluation of one's self is crucial for the evaluation of one's life as a whole (Çivitci & Çivitci, 2009). A longitudinal study revealed that self-esteem consistently predicted subsequent life satisfaction, whereas the effects of life satisfaction on subsequent self-esteem were not significant (Ye, Yu, & Li, 2012). High self-esteem has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction in adolescents (Zhang & Leung, 2002). Self-esteem often serves as a proximal factor or mediator in determining individuals' life satisfaction (Salmela-Aro & Tuominen-Soini, 2010). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, no research to date has examined the mediating role of self-esteem in the relation between SES and adolescent life satisfaction.

1.2. Optimism as a moderator

Although low SES may undermine self-esteem and life satisfaction, it is possible that not all people are equally influenced by its effects. The organism–environment interaction model (Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, & Theokas, 2006) proposes that individuals with certain intrapersonal traits respond differently to similar environmental contexts. In this model not all individuals are equally influenced by the environment; dynamics of individual and context interactions contribute to the person's psychological and social adaptation. Thus, it is important to examine individual variables that may moderate the effect of SES on self-esteem or satisfaction. In the current study, we argue that optimism is one such intrapersonal variable.

As a positive personality trait, optimism refers to a tendency toward positive expectations for the future and confidence in one's ability to cope with challenges (Friedman & Kern, 2014). Prior research has documented the important role of optimism for people's psychosocial adaptation and well-being (Alarcon, Bowling, & Khazon, 2013; Krok, 2015). Whereas many studies have regarded optimism as an antecedent

factor (e.g., Wong & Lim, 2009) or as playing a mediation role (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010) for well-being, relatively less is known with regard to optimism as a moderator (Lai, 2009).

For socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, those who are optimists tend to think of the future in a positive manner and believe that life will be generally favorable (Chen & Miller, 2013). According to the shift-and-persist model (Chen, 2012), these low SES individuals may develop an approach to life that prioritizes shifting (accepting stress for what it is and adapting oneself to it) in combination with persisting (enduring life challenges by holding on to meaning and optimism). Optimism, as a key component of persisting, is an important protective factor for well-being and health among low SES individuals. Furthermore, optimists preferentially use more approach (e.g., problem-solving coping) than avoidance coping strategies (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006) and sustain effort and commitment in goal pursuit (Monzani et al., 2015) than do their pessimistic peers. These qualities may protect optimists against the negative effect of low SES. Thus, optimism might therefore serve as a protective factor to reduce the potential risks of low SES, namely, the detrimental effects of low SES on self-esteem and life satisfaction would be moderated by optimism. To our knowledge, in terms of adolescent self-esteem and life satisfaction, no previous research has examined whether optimism is a protective factor, especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents.

1.3. The present study

To summarize, the purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between SES and life satisfaction and the underlying mediating and moderating mechanisms. Firstly, we examined the mediating role of self-esteem in this relation. Secondly, we further explored whether this indirect association would be moderated by optimism. Based on the literature review, the present study proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. SES would be indirectly related to adolescent life satisfaction through self-esteem. Low SES may undermine self-esteem, which in turn would lead to lower life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2. Optimism would moderate the indirect association between SES and life satisfaction via self-esteem. Specifically, the indirect association between SES and life satisfaction would be much weaker for adolescents with higher levels of optimism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We recruited participants from one middle school and one high school during the spring semester of 2015. Convenience sampling was used to select two or three classes in each grade of each school. A total of 688 adolescents (320 females and 348 males) participated in this study, and their ages ranged from 11 to 19 years (mean age = 14.53 years, $SD = 1.81$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Socioeconomic status

The Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Currie, Elton, Todd, & Platt, 1997) was used to assess socioeconomic status (SES) in order to avoid too many missing values on the traditional measures of SES, such as family income or parental education. The FAS was developed as a measure of SES (e.g., van Geel & Vedder, 2011) for the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) surveys. The FAS includes four items: Does your family own a car, van, or truck (Yes, two or more = 0; Yes, one = 1; No = 2); During the past 12 months, how many times did you travel away on holiday with your family (More than twice = 0; Twice = 1;

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