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Family structure and income during the stages of childhood and subsequent prosocial behavior in young adulthood

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigated whether family structure transition and low income are risk factors in the development of prosocial behavior. Models of young adults' prosocial behavior – charitable giving and volunteering – were estimated as functions of their family structure and income during the stages of childhood. Participants were a representative sample of 1011 American young adults. In the full sample, family structure transition during adolescence was negatively associated with subsequent charitable giving in young adulthood. Low income during adolescence was negatively associated with both giving and volunteering in young adulthood. European-American young men also exhibited a negative association between family structure transition during adolescence and subsequent volunteering. The results did not seem to describe African-American young adults. Keeping this qualification in mind, the results suggest that adolescence is a sensitive stage in the development of charitable giving and volunteering.
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Charitable giving and volunteering are important dimensions of civil society, sufficiently important that public policy seeks to encourage adults to perform these prosocial behaviors. While there has been extensive research on the development of prosocial behavior among children (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006), there has been less research about how demographic events in the family lives of children are associated with children's prosocial development, and even less research linking such events to the giving and volunteering they later do as adults. However, Chase-Lansdale, Wakschlag, and Brooks-Gunn (1995) have drawn upon the developmental psychology literature to build a theoretical framework describing the role of the family in the development of children's caring, a construct that encompasses prosocial behavior. Chase-Lansdale et al.'s theory predicts that poverty and marital distress are factors that put the development of caring at risk.

Since the formulation of Chase-Lansdale et al.'s (1995) theory fifteen years ago, some evidence about volunteering in adolescence has appeared that is consistent with either the prediction about family income (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998, 1999; Uggen & Janikula, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1997) or the prediction about family structure (Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Keith, Nelson, Schlabach, & Thompson, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 1997; Youniss, McLelland, Su, & Yates, 1999), but we know little about whether family structure transition remains a risk factor to prosocial behavior once family income is controlled (or vice versa), and little about whether the risk factors are relevant for prosocial behavior emerging in young adulthood. We have no evidence about whether family structure transition and low income are risk factors for

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charitable giving, and no evidence about whether the risk factors occurring in different stages of childhood are especially detrimental to prosocial behavior in young adulthood. The objective of the present study is to fill these gaps in knowledge.

What parents can do to promote the development of prosocial behavior

Prosocial moral reasoning develops in stages (Eisenberg, 1982, 1986; Eisenberg, Lennon, & Roth, 1983; Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNally, & Shea, 1991; Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989; Eisenberg et al., 1987). Progression through stages is theorized to be invariant, with all stages judged to be important: (a) early childhood because of the development of empathy (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992) as well as cognitive growth; (b) middle childhood through adolescence because of the development of perspective taking to encompass the needs of an abstract "other," again requiring a combination of both empathic and cognitive development (Hoffman, 2000); and (c) adolescence when helping others in need can be transformed into an internalized value (Eisenberg, 1982, 1986).

Experimental methods have identified three interventions that increase children's performance of prosocial behavior: provide a role-model of the desired prosocial behavior, verbally encourage the desired behavior using other-oriented induction, and reinforce the prosocial behavior with dispositional praise (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Grusec, 1991). This suggests three actions a parent can take to promote children's prosocial development. A fourth action is to provide children opportunities to help others (Eisenberg, 1990).

In addition to these actions, Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) emphasized that a parent's expression of care and warmth to children is crucial for the development of caring because children learn how to care by being recipients of care. Supporting evidence has been found in a study of teenage volunteers (Wuthnow, 1995) and a study of adolescents' perspective taking (Soenens, Duriez, Vansteenkiste, & Goossens, 2007). There also is evidence that mother-child relationship quality promotes the internalization of prosocial values (Barry, Padilla-Walker, Madsen, & Nelson, 2008). Penner (2004) reported that parental warmth and modeling are linked to adult children's other-oriented empathy and helpfulness, which in turn have been linked to prosocial behaviors, including volunteering (Penner, 2002).

Family structure transition and low income can disrupt promotion of prosocial development

Compared to living with two-biological parents, other family structures have been associated with a wide range of adverse children's achievement, behavioral, and psychological outcomes: lower test scores, dropping out of high school, neither being employed nor in school, problem behaviors, early child-bearing, smoking, and distress (e.g., see McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Similarly, low income during childhood has been associated with adverse outcomes (e.g., see Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). There is debate about whether the associations are causal (family structure: Cherlin et al., 1991; income: Shea, 2000).

To the extent that causality is behind these associations, a suspected mechanism is stress that family structure transition and low income create in the lives of children (family structure: Amato, 2010; low income: Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Stress also is at the root of Chase-Lansdale et al.'s (1995) theoretical argument that marital distress and poverty are risk factors to children's prosocial development. Chase-Lansdale et al. argued that marital distress implies that children observe models of hostility rather than models of caring. In addition, custodial parents experiencing stress due to marital conflict both pre- and post-divorce must focus on their own family's needs, and hence may be less attentive to the needs of people outside the family, implying less modeling of charitable giving and volunteering, less emphasis on helping people outside the family in everyday encounters, and less frequent provision of opportunities for children to participate in such help. Further, after a divorce there may be less time to take these actions because the custodial parent usually shoulders most of the economic and parenting responsibility for the children. Stress may affect the parent's mental health, anger, and hostility thereby leading to a less nurturing parenting style—implying less use of other-oriented induction and dispositional praise—and a less warm and close parent–child relationship, implying less chance for children to learn how to care by being a recipient of care.

In addition to effects experienced via the parent's stress, children experience their own stress in response to divorce. Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) argued that children can become psychologically flooded—emotionally over-aroused to the point that they cannot "understand their own emotions or read the emotional cues of others (p. 535)." Over-arousal is thought to inhibit the development of empathy for others and instead lead to personal distress (Hoffman, 2000). A disposition toward personal distress can inhibit prosocial behavior in situations where it is easy to escape the situation without helping (the arousal cost-reward model; Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006), and charitable giving and volunteering typically represent situations from which easy escape is possible. Children's over-arousal may make them less attentive to the needs of others because difficulty in regulating emotion is thought to inhibit empathic responses (Eisenberg, 2002). Stress in children may be induced, and these adverse processes continued, when a custodial parent remarries and relationships between all members of the family adjust to the addition of the new step-parent.

Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) similarly argued that poverty is a risk factor to children's prosocial development primarily because it creates stress in the lives of parents that can weaken the warmth of the parent–child relationship. Stress induced by having to survive on low income is thought to disrupt effective parenting practices and produce harsh parent–child interactions (see, e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; McLoyd, 1990; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994). There is evidence that the effects of stress are mediated through a parent's mental health and emotions (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simmons, 1994; McLoyd et al., 1994) as well as anger and hostility (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1997; Conger et al.,

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