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Coös Teens' View of Family Economic Stress Is Tied to Quality of Relationships at Home

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Introduction

Family economic hardship during adolescence affects family relationships and the social, emotional, and behavioral development of a substantial number of American youth. Ample evidence shows that economic hardship can be detrimental to adolescent well-being through its effects on parents' well-being and the quality of the marital and parent-child relationship.[1] Because most research has focused on parents' perceptions of economic hardship, little is known about adolescents' views of their family's economic situation and its relationship to adolescents' family experiences. In this brief, we examine adolescents' perceptions of their family's economic climate and its link to parent and sibling relationships.

The ecological model of development provides a useful theoretical framework for examining how the environment influences adolescent family relationships. According to this model, there are levels of interaction, some more immediate and some broader, that combine to influence family relationships. More remote family environments, such as the family's economic status, can affect all family members and are likely to affect parent-child and sibling interactions. These interactions influence adolescents' family experiences and development.

Although adolescents have little control over family economic hardship, the nature of their perceptions of that hardship may play a direct role in their family relationships. In adolescence, youth begin to evaluate their environment with more awareness. Adolescents who perceive their family as unable either to meet its financial obligations or to secure basic material goods and services[2] may be vulnerable to economic stress and its influence on family relationships. Like parents who report greater economic pressure, adolescents may have higher levels of anger, frustration, and distress that are reflected in their parent and sibling relationships.[3]

Key Findings

- One-third of adolescents in Coös County, New Hampshire, perceive that their family is experiencing significant economic pressure.
- Significant economic pressure is linked to negative parent-child and sibling relationships one year later.

To explore adolescents' perceptions of family economic hardship, we analyze data from the Coös County Youth Study. Coös County in northern New Hampshire once had a thriving economy built on a booming paper industry. At one point, it was the largest newspaper supplier in the world. However, the paper industry has declined significantly in the last twenty years, with a devastating economic impact on the county that has transformed the local economy into a largely service-based one. The loss of higher-wage mill jobs has contributed to Coös County having the highest poverty rate in New Hampshire and families leaving the area for better opportunities.

Using seventh graders'[4] self-reports gathered in 2008 and 2009, we report adolescents' perceptions of family economic pressure in 2008 and explore whether these views are linked to parent and sibling relationship experiences one year later.

Adolescents Are Fairly Evenly Divided in Their Views of Family Economic Pressures

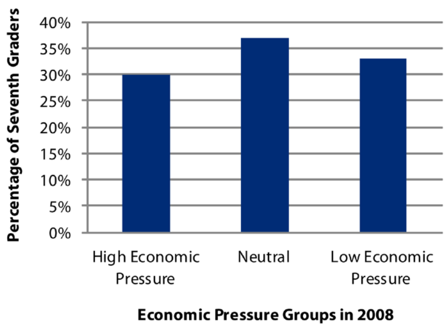
To assess adolescents' perceptions of their family's economic hardship, we combined responses to the following two questions:

1. Families are different in the amount of money they have. How would you rate your family? [1 = very little money available to 5 = lots of money available].

2. How satisfied are you with your family's financial situation? [1 = not very satisfied to 5 = very satisfied].

We then categorized adolescents into three groups on the basis of the average of their responses to the two items. The three groups were high economic pressure (≤ 2), neutral (= 3), and low economic pressure (≥ 4). Roughly equal shares of adolescents reported high, neutral, or low economic pressure (see Figure 1). As found in other studies with parents, adolescents' views of economic pressure are unrelated to parent education level and number of siblings.[5] They are, however, related to parents' marital status. Adolescents from married two-parent families are more likely to report low economic pressure and less likely to report high economic pressure than are adolescents of divorced, remarried, or widowed parents.

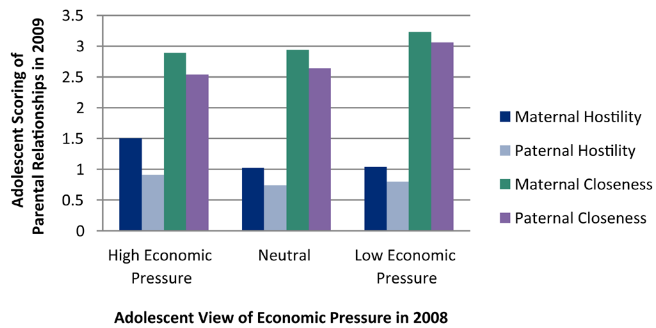
Figure 1. Adolescents' View of Family Economic Pressure



Economic Difficulties Challenge the Quality of Adolescents' Parent-Child Relationships

Adolescence is a time of growing pressure to have money for social interactions, clothing, activities, and transportation. These social pressures, combined with a family's economic difficulty, will likely influence the nature of adolescent-parent interactions. Indeed, adolescents who perceive low economic pressure report the greatest closeness with their parents[6] a year later. Adolescents who report high economic pressure report the highest levels of hostility[7] in interactions with their mother a year later (this finding was not evident for adolescents' relationship with their father).[8] Like parents who perceive family economic hardship, adolescents' perceptions of economic pressure and the day-to-day frustrations associated with it are linked to the quality of parent-child relationship experiences (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Economic Pressure and Parental Relationships One Year Later

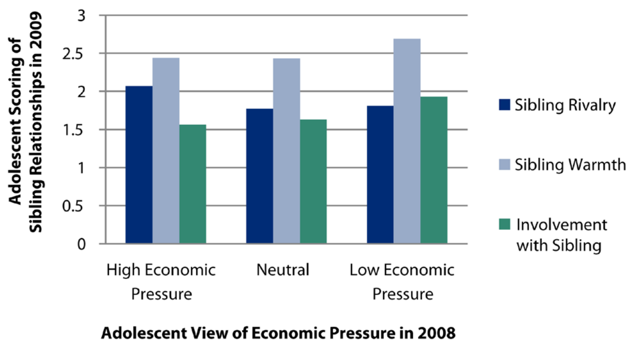


Adolescents' Sibling Relationships Are Also Challenged by Family Economic Struggles

Siblings have a unique role in adolescents' lives and often share an "insider's view" of family dynamics. The nature of sibling relationships often mirrors the quality of the marital and parent-child relationships and is reflective of family characteristics (such as family stress).[9] Yet, the links between family economic pressure and sibling relationship quality are rarely considered. We therefore examine the connection between adolescents' perceptions of family economic pressure and sibling rivalry, warmth, and involvement. Higher scores in Figure 3 indicate higher ratings of these sibling relationship qualities.

We find that adolescents who perceive that their families are facing little economic pressure report the highest involvement and warmth in their relationship with their closest sibling a year later.[10] In contrast, those who reported high economic pressure in 2008 had the most rivalry[11] with their closest sibling in 2009[12] (see Figure 3). Other work has shown that competition among siblings tends to be higher in families with low parental and familial resources.[13]

Figure 3. Economic Pressure and Sibling Relationship Quality One Year Later



Money Management, Job Training, and Family Communication Skills Are Options for Intervention

About two-thirds of Coös County seventh graders categorized their family's economic pressure as neutral or high, which may reflect the larger economic climate of the area. Similar to previous studies referenced here, we find that adolescents' perception of family economic hardship may leave them vulnerable to negative family relationships. Our results show that the financial characteristics of the broader family environment left few family members' relationships untouched. Moreover, we highlight the potential lasting connection between adolescents' perceptions of family economic pressure and the nature of their family relationship experiences a year later. Other research has shown that such vulnerability in difficult financial situations is a risk factor for lower adjustment and behavioral problems.[14]

Given the importance of familial relationships to adolescents and the problems associated with financial hardship, solutions are needed to help reduce the negative influence of family hardship on adolescents and their family relationship experiences. Options include promoting programs that effectively lower financial strain, such as money management and job training. In addition, adolescents, their parents, and siblings could be helped with problem-solving skills that may enhance family functioning and communication and help resolve conflicts over money and financial constraints. Programs such as parent education and support groups offered by local family resource centers might be one place where these communication skills could be addressed. Initiatives or programs that are targeted to economically challenged families and that promote positive familial relationships may improve future life outcomes for Coös adolescents.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, R.D. Conger and G.H. Elder, Jr., *Families In Troubled Times: Adapting to Change In Rural America* (New York: Aldine, 1994).

2. R.D. Conger et al., "Pathways of economic influence on adolescent adjustment," *American Journal of Community Psychology,* 27 (1999): 519-541.

3. K. J. Conger, M.A. Rueter, and R. D. Conger, "The Role of Economic Pressure in the Lives of Parents and Their Adolescents: The Family Stress Model, in *Negotiating Adolescence in Times of Social Change*, edited by L. J. Crockett and R. K. Silberiesen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4. Youth participants included in this study include 304 seventh graders between the ages of 11 and 15, with an average age of 12.63.

5. Conger et al., "Pathways of Economic Influence."

6. Measured by four items (for example, "I feel close to my mother/father"; 0 = Strongly Disagree through 4 = Strongly Agree) taken from M.K. Johnson, G.H. Elder, and M. Stern, "Attachments to family and community and the young adult transition of rural youth," *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 15* (2005): 99-125.

7. Measured by four items (for example, "How often in the last month has your mother/father gotten angry at you?"; 0 = never in the past month through 3 = at least once a day) taken from R.D. Conger et al., "Economic stress, coercive family process and developmental problems of adolescents," *Child Development,* 65 (1999): 541-561.

8. A MANOVA was performed to assess differences between the economic pressure groups on the linear combination of the four parent-relationship quality variables: mother warmth, father warmth, mother hostility, and father hostility. A significant difference was found using Wilks' criterion, $\Lambda = .87$, $F(2, 239) = 4.33$, $p = .01$, and it revealed the three economic pressure groups were distinguishable on mother warmth, $F(2, 239) = 3.26$, $p = .04$, father warmth, $F(2, 239) = 5.78$, $p = .01$, and mother hostility, $F(2, 242) = 8.73$, $p = .01$.

9. See, for example, C.M. Stocker and L. Youngblade, "Marital conflict and parental hostility: Links with children's sibling and peer relationships," *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13 (1999): 598-609.

10. We measured sibling involvement with three items (for example, "How much free time do you spend with your brother/sister?"; 0 = none, to 3 = a lot) from W. Furman and D. Buhrmester, "Children's Perceptions of the Personal Relationships in Their Social Networks," *Developmental Psychology,* 21 (6) (1985): 1016-24. We measured sibling warmth with five items (for example, "I feel close to my brother/sister"; 1 = not at all, to 5 = a lot) from L. Kramer and L.A.

Baron, "Parental Perceptions of Children's Sibling Relationships," *Family Relations,* 44 (1985): 95-103.

11. We measured sibling rivalry with three items (for example, "I feel like I am in competition with my brother/sister"; 1 = not at all, to 4 = a lot) taken from L. Kramer and L.A. Baron, "Parental Perceptions of Children's Sibling Relationships," *Family Relations,* 44 (1985): 95-103.

12. We used a MANOVA to assess differences between the economic pressure groups on the linear combination of the three sibling relationship quality variables: involvement, warmth, and rivalry. A significant difference was found using Wilks' criterion, $\Lambda = .94$, $F\ (2, 242) = 2.01$, $p = .04$, and it revealed the three economic pressure groups were distinguishable on sibling involvement, $F\ (2, 242) = 4.09$, $p = .02$, sibling warmth, $F\ (2, 242) = 2.56$, $p = .08$, and sibling rivalry, $F\ (2, 242) = 3.43$, $p = .03$.

13. See, for example, J. Dunn, "Brothers and sisters in middle childhood and early adolescence: Continuity and change in individual differences," in *Sibling relationships: Their causes and their consequences*, edited by G.H. Brody (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1996), 31-46.

14. Conger et al., "Pathways of Economic Influence."

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