

The Effects of a Changing Economy
on the Socialization of Young Adolescents'
Academic and Vocational Aspirations

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One function of the family as a basic unit of social organization is its central role in the socialization of children's vocational development. Parents play an early formative influence, encouraging children to pursue certain course work, introducing vocational options, and providing models of occupational choice. Most empirical work on the influence of the family on children's occupation has focused on vocational outcomes at the expense of developmental processes (see Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984 for a review).

This paper differs from earlier work in several ways. First, the developmental process of choosing a vocation is investigated by looking at opportunity factors and socialization practices in families of young adolescents.. Second, this work places the family in a larger economic context and looks at the influence of structural change in the economy on parents' current work security. An effort is made to link parents' experience at the workplace, specifically positive (promotions) and negative (lay-offs and demotions) changes, to their values, concerns and vocationally relevant socialization practices. In line with conceptual advances in the systems approaches to child development it is argued that processes within the family are influenced by extrafamilial settings where family members spend their time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Crouter, 1984; Kohn & Schooler, 1983).

Major structural change in the U.S. economy means that many contemporary parents are faced with work lay-offs, plant closings, and demotions to lower skilled jobs. Although many blue-collar families were accustomed to periodic lay-offs, the character of the present crisis means that these lay-offs and demotions are of a more permanent character (Burr, 1982; Moen, Kain, & Elder, 1983) and may mean that families will be forced to re-evaluate choices they had heretofore assumed. The main hypothesis of this study is that negative changes such as lay-offs or demotions in parental work security will constrict not only the opportunities that parents can provide their children in the present but also the aspirations that they imagine for the children's future. Such parents will feel incompetent as vocational models for children. They will be more concerned than other parents about the preparation their children are getting for future jobs, will worry about the security of their children's future but will discourage children from careers

like their own and will voice greater dissatisfaction than other parents with their own life accomplishments. Since they have had first-hand experience with economic uncertainty, they will be more worried about providing financially for their children and will endorse secure but uncostly careers such as the military for their children. Finally, they will be more likely than other parents to discuss jobs with their children since jobs should be a salient topic for parents who cannot take their own jobs for granted.

The effects of a changing economy on family life are not uniform. In fact, some families are reaping benefits during these changing times. Therefore, besides negative changes, the effects of a parent's work promotion on the family environment will be explored. These parents should feel more confident about the future, more satisfied with their own life accomplishments and their ability to prepare their children for future work, more likely to encourage their children in careers like their own, more certain that their children will attend college to further explore vocational possibilities and less committed to the possibility of a military career for their offspring.

The effects of changing parental work security should affect the daily family environment. Parents who are preoccupied with insecurity in their own work lives should be less available to respond to the needs of their children. Risk factors should increase for young adolescents. This hypothesis was tested using teachers' reports of young adolescents' school adjustment and parents' concerns with their young adolescent's involvement in deviant activities. Furthermore, adolescents should express more concern with their family's financial security and their own future work security if their parents are struggling with instability in their own work lives. Finally, this group of adolescents should be less likely to expect to attend a four-year college and should be more likely to endorse vocational training and a military career after high school. Again, opposite patterns are expected for young adolescents whose parents have recently been promoted.

Methods

This study was part of a two year, four wave panel study (the Transitions at Early Adolescence Project), investigating the effects of normative environmental transitions (e.g., the move to junior high school) on early

adolescent motivational, interpersonal, and achievement outcomes. Students completed questionnaires during the fall and spring of their sixth and seventh grade school years.

Besides young adolescents, parents and teachers also participated in the study, providing independent sources of information about adolescent adjustment and socialization practices in two different developmental settings (the home and school).

The study was conducted in twelve working- and middle-class communities where auto and auto-related manufacturing were the main industries. Lay-offs and plant closings were common events in these communities as evidenced by the official unemployment statistics that ranged between 7.9% and 21% at Wave I of the study. Parents' participation in the Transitions study provided a unique opportunity to link the effects of a changing economy to the socialization of young adolescents' vocational development.

Parents were mailed questionnaires that asked a broad range of questions about their children's achievement motivation and about their own beliefs and socialization practices. The data for this study focus on parents' aspirations, beliefs, and socialization practices relevant to young adolescents' vocational development. In addition, parents were asked whether their family had recently experienced any work-related changes such as a temporary or permanent lay-off, a demotion, or a promotion. Families were then categorized according to these positive and negative changes in family work security. Since there was more missing data for fathers in the sample, families were coded according to mothers' reports. Based on the mothers' reports, there were 382 (positive change) or promoted families, 909 families who had no changes in parents' work status, and 449 (negative change) families who experienced a temporary or permanent lay-off or a demotion on the job. Positive and negative change in work security is treated as a family-level change since the family system is considered the socialization environment of interest. Since ninety-three percent of the fathers in this sample were working full-time whereas only thirty percent of the mothers were working full-time, most of the work related changes were experienced by fathers. For discussion purposes, the three family categories will be referred to as the gain group (positive changes or promotions), the loss group (demotions or lay-offs), and the no change group.

Analysis Plan

An analysis of covariance technique was used with parental education as the covariate and family work change as the categorical variable. The dependent variables were analyzed separately for mothers and fathers with the appropriate parental education used as the covariate. Young adolescents' responses were analyzed using the average or mid-parent education for the household as the covariate.

Parental education was used as a control for family social class background since, in contrast to income, it precedes changes in parents' work. It is impossible to say whether the family's current income is lower or higher as a result of the changes at work reported by the parents. The ancova test of equal adjusted means tests for the effects of family work changes after the effect of parental education on the dependent variable is covaried out. Therefore, significant F-statistics in the test of equal adjusted means would indicate a unique contribution of family work security. Post hoc comparisons of the equal adjusted means for the three groups were done when the F-statistic indicated a significant effect of family work change.

Results

The analysis of variance indicated a significant association of family work change with mother's education, $F(2,1731) = 26.52, p < .0001$ and with father's education $F(2, 1142) = 35.93, p < .0001$.

Results for Mothers and Fathers as Vocational Models

Table 1 shows the results for mothers' and fathers' self-perceptions as vocational models for their children. Table 2 shows the effects of gains and losses at work on parents' socialization practices.

There was a significant effect of parental education on most of the dependent variables. With the effects of educational background covaried out, mothers in loss families expressed more concern that they could not afford

additional education for their children, more concern that the school system was not preparing their children for future jobs, and less satisfaction with their own life accomplishments than mothers in either the no change or gain families. Maternal concerns with the quality of educational preparation for future jobs was especially marked for mothers of daughters. Mothers in loss families were also more likely than either of the other two groups to encourage military careers for their children and to discourage their children from jobs like the parents'.

Mothers in gain families expressed greater confidence than mothers in no change families in their ability to prepare their children for future jobs as well as less concern than the other two groups with their child's future work security. This latter result was especially marked for parents of daughters. Gain mothers were also more likely than loss mothers to encourage their children to go to college. One unexpected and interesting result was that both the gain and loss mothers discuss jobs with their children more often than the no change mothers, perhaps because work changes, whether positive or negative, are a salient issue in these families.

Fewer results of family work changes were found for fathers. With the effects of paternal education covaried out, fathers in loss families were more concerned than either of the other two groups with their ability to provide financially for their children's education. Fathers in the loss group were more likely than any other fathers to discourage their children from pursuing jobs like theirs and gain fathers were most likely to encourage their children to pursue jobs like the fathers had. Fathers in loss families were significantly more dissatisfied than the other two groups with their life accomplishments.

Results for Young Adolescents

Table 3 shows the ancova results for sixth graders. With the effects of parents' education covaried out, sixth graders, especially girls, in loss families were having more school adjustment problems according to their sixth grade teachers' reports. Mothers reported more concerns that this group would get into deviant activities and, again, the effect was especially strong for girls. Children in loss households also expressed greater concern with their family's financial security and were more likely than any other group to say that they

expected to seek vocational training immediately after high school. Children in gain households were more likely than any other group to expect that they would attend a four year college after high school graduation. Change in parental work had no effect on young adolescents' expectation of a military career.

Discussion

The results reported in this study suggest some interesting directions for future research. One of the main goals of this study was to test for differences in parents' socialization practices as a function of positive and negative changes in family work security. It is noteworthy that most of the effects of changing family work security occur in mothers' socialization practices, not fathers'. This suggests several possibilities. First, since more families are represented in the mothers' reports, (including single-parent families), the results may simply reflect different samples. A second and more interesting possibility is that mothers and fathers may play distinct roles as socializers of children's vocational development. Youniss and Smollar (1985), for example, found that fathers' interactions with their adolescents focused on issues of adolescent performance whereas mothers act as confidants and advisors to their adolescents on a daily basis. Fathers advised their adolescents when specific personal advice was sought.

In the present study the hypothesis that mothers and fathers fulfill different socialization functions in children's vocational development was not tested. Future work could test this hypothesis by comparing mothers' and fathers' responses within each work security category.

Children's primary environments are affected by positive and negative changes at their parents' workplace. Children's present adjustment in school and their concerns about their family's work security show the contemporaneous effects. In addition, the child's window on opportunity, his/her assessments of future possibilities, are affected such that changes that the family is currently experiencing may have long-term effects.

Finally, it is worth repeating that the effects of family work changes are found when family SES (indexed by parents' education) are covaried out. The substantive issue remains. Mothers and fathers in loss families have significantly less education and parents in gain families have significantly more education. Therefore, the socialization of children's vocational development is affected both by the average level of parental education and by changes at parents' workplace.

Implications for Social Policy

In the not so distant past it was possible for a high school graduate to enter the labor market as an unskilled worker and earn a living that would support a family. Structural change in the nation's economy has put an end to the possibility that a decent standard of living can be earned without post-secondary education and training. Between 1979 and 1985, the United States suffered a net loss of 1.7 million manufacturing jobs. Entry level positions in the work force for high school graduates are now found in service and retail sectors where wages and benefits are one-half or one-third of the typical manufacturing job (Weitzel, 1987).

The results of this study suggest that children may be doubly affected by the changes that their parents are experiencing in an unstable economy. First, children are at risk when their parents experience some loss of security at the workplace because the family's financial security is jeopardized. The stress of this insecurity is felt in adjustment problems at school and in mothers' concerns that the child is at risk for deviant activities. Second, the future possibilities that parents and children imagine are powerfully shaped by family background (specifically, parents' own education) but are also influenced by new insecurities of a changing economy.

The familiar finding that SES begets SES is largely reinforced in these results and points to the need for other social institutions to equalize opportunity and increase access to education and careers that may not be within the scope of some families' current possibilities.

Specific Policy Recommendations

The family is only one institution that contributes to children's vocational development. Preparation of tomorrow's work force will require the concerted efforts of other community organizations including schools, youth groups, colleges and universities, and companies. The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship has recommended the expansion of specific educational programs and the consideration of certain new approaches to deal with the transition from school to work for non-college youth. The Commission's recommendations include the expansion of specific educational programs targeted at high-risk populations before the transition to work. These include the expansion of the Head Start program to serve an additional 600,000 children and of Chapter I of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act to serve an additional 2.5 million students, including high school students.

The Commission further recommends that Job Corps and the Job Training Partnership Act be expanded. Several approaches that deserve further exploration include monitored work experience (apprenticeships, pre-employment training, and youth-operated enterprises); community and neighborhood service that expose youth to adult work opportunities; redirected vocational education; career information and counseling in schools and community organizations that would develop the capacities of parents as career educators.

High school vocational education programs should be re-evaluated to determine whether their training is relevant to the needs of a changing economy. One innovative curriculum recently developed by the Center for New Work at the University of Michigan-Flint is noteworthy in this regard. The Future Work Curriculum is a series of ten videotapes to be used in classroom discussion of the skills and training that are becoming obsolete and those that will be useful in the future. The program emphasizes the dangers of dropping out and the minimal existence that minimal skills will bring. It also introduces students to the trend toward multiple careers and encourages students to develop useful ways to spend time between jobs. Programs of this sort that teach vocational development in a context of personal development and decision-making are needed so that today's students will not be caught by surprise when they make the transition from school to work.

Without concerted policy efforts to supplement family resources, today's children can look forward to a future

... divided not along lines of race or geography, but rather of education. A highly competitive, technological economy can offer prosperity to those with advanced skills, while the trend for those with less education is to scramble for unsteady, part-time, low-paying jobs. (Youth and America's Future, 1988, p.1)

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Table 1
The effects of positive and negative changes in family work security on parents as vocational models

Dependent Variables	Results for Mothers							
	Positive Changes		No Changes		Negative Changes			
	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range		
						F-Statistics		
							Covers. Adj. Means	
Financial Worry	2.68/2.74a (.06)	360 - 381	3.05/3.05b (.04)	833 - 904	3.65/3.60c (.05)	429 - 446	65.53***	64.94***
Satisfied with My Accomplishments	5.47/5.44a (.06)		5.32/5.32a (.04)		5.01/5.03b (.05)		17.70***	16.19***
Worried Re. Child's Future Job Security	3.56/3.61a (.06)		3.79/3.79b (.04)		3.93/3.88b (.05)		46.89***	5.65*
Confident Re. Preparing Child For Future Work	5.20/5.15a (.07)		4.91/4.91b (.05)		4.98/5.02a,b (.07)		28.63***	4.38*
Concerned with School's Vocational Efforts	4.14/4.17a (.06)		4.15/4.15a (.04)		4.42/4.39b (.05)		26.10***	7.29**
Results for Fathers								
	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	F-Statistics	
							Covers. Adj. Means	
Financial Worry	2.72/2.78a (.06)	276 - 279	2.81/2.83a (.04)	599 - 610	3.54/3.44b (.07)	249 - 256	52.02***	31.55***
Satisfied with My Accomplishments	5.49/5.46a (.06)		5.40/5.39a (.04)		5.01/5.07b (.07)		15.33***	9.90***
Worried Re. Child's Future Job Security	3.56/3.64 (.07)		3.56/3.58 (.05)		3.72/3.59 (.07)		68.56***	.27
Confident Re. Preparing Child For Future Work	5.46/5.42a (.08)		5.19/5.18b (.05)		4.96/5.06b (.08)		14.67***	6.08*
Concerned with School's Vocational Efforts	4.23/4.28 (.07)		4.16/4.17 (.04)		4.27/4.20 (.07)		27.05***	.90

Note + p < .05 *p < .01 **p < .001 ***p < .0001

Superscripts within each row indicate significant differences between the adjusted stratum means

Table 2
The effects of positive and negative changes in family work security on parents' vocational socialization practices

Dependent Variables	Results for Mothers			
	Positive Changes Mean/Adj. M (SE)	No Changes Mean/Adj. M (SE)	Negative Changes Mean/Adj. M (SE)	F-Statistics
	N's Range 360 - 381	N's Range 833 - 904	N's Range 429 - 446	Covars. Adj. Means
Discuss Jobs With Child	4.52/4.51a (.09)	4.14/4.14b (.06)	4.40/4.41a (.09)	1.69 7.17**
Encourage a Military Career	2.52/2.56a (.09)	2.57/2.57a (.06)	2.93/2.90b (.08)	10.25** 5.58*
Encourage College	6.59/6.54a (.06)	6.45/6.46a,b (.04)	6.30/6.35b (.06)	52.57 3.81+
Encourage Your Job	3.49/3.42a (.10)	3.31/3.31a (.06)	2.84/2.89b (.09)	27.57*** 9.95***
Results for Fathers				
Dependent Variables	Positive Changes Mean/Adj. M (SE)	No Changes Mean/Adj. M (SE)	Negative Changes Mean/Adj. M. (SE)	F-Statistics
	N's Range 276 - 279	N's Range 599 - 610	N's Range 249 - 256	Covars. Adj. Means
Discuss Jobs With Child	3.49/3.47 (.10)	3.48/3.47 (.07)	3.58/3.62 (.11)	2.73 .71
Encourage a Military Career	2.56/2.63 (.11)	2.85/2.87 (.07)	3.04/2.92 (.11)	27.28*** 2.12
Encourage College	6.51/6.15 (.06)	6.34/6.32 (.04)	6.25/6.35 (.06)	61.26*** 1.62
Encourage Your Job	4.15/4.06a (.10)	3.73/3.71b (.07)	3.01/3.17c (.10)	47.73*** 15.24***

Note + p < .05 * p < .01 ** p < .001 *** p < .0001
 Superscripts within each row indicate significant differences between the adjusted stratum means

Table 3

The effects of positive and negative changes in family work security on young adolescents' adjustment and aspirations

Dependent Variables	Positive Changes		No Changes		Negative Changes		F-Statistics
	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	Mean/Adj. M (SE)	N's Range	
School Adjustment (Sixth Gr. Tch Report)	2.53/2.55a (.02)	299 - 381	2.54/2.53a (.01)	734 - 781	2.47/2.48b (.02)	321 - 389	14.47***
Concerns Re. Deviant Involvement (Mother's Report)	2.92/2.97a (.09)	299 - 381	2.99/3.00a (.06)	734 - 781	3.36/3.29b (.09)	321 - 389	20.12***
Concerns: Family's Financial Security	2.75/2.78a (.05)	299 - 381	2.77/2.77a (.04)	734 - 781	3.23/3.20b (.05)	321 - 389	15.57***
Aspirations: Vocational Training	2.37/2.41a (.05)	299 - 381	2.46/2.46a (.03)	734 - 781	2.71/2.66b (.05)	321 - 389	39.09***
Aspirations: 4 yr College	3.33/3.28a (.05)	299 - 381	3.17/3.17b (.03)	734 - 781	3.04/3.09b (.04)	321 - 389	64.93***
							6.75**

Note + p < .05 *p < .01 ** p < .001 *** p < .0001

Superscripts within each row indicate significant differences between the adjusted stratum means