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Adolescent Agentic Orientations: Contemporaneous Family Influence, Parental Biography and Intergenerational Development

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Abstract

Agentic orientations developed in adolescence have been linked to better health, well-being, and achievements in the years following. This study examines longitudinal parental influences on the development of adolescent children's agentic orientations, captured by the core constructs of mastery beliefs and generalized life expectations. Drawing on multigenerational panel data from the United States (1991–2011), the study examines contemporaneous family factors, but also how parental biographies (their own transition to adulthood) and parents' own adolescent agentic orientations influence their adolescent children. Study adolescents were 46% male, 52% white, and 15.6 years old on average. The findings indicate that parents' early orientations and experiences in the transition to adulthood have little effect on their children's mastery beliefs, but that parents' generalized life expectations (in adolescence) and having married before having the child were associated with their children's more optimistic life expectations. Contemporaneous family income and optimistic expectations among parents-as-adolescents were somewhat substitutable as positive influences on adolescents' optimistic life expectations. The findings contribute to our understanding of intergenerational and over-time influences on these key adolescent orientations.

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Keywords

Agency; mastery; optimism; intergenerational development

Introduction

Social science is collectively working toward a greater understanding of the contexts for individual development, with scholars from many disciplines extending the understanding of “context” to aspects like neighborhoods, institutions, historical eras, and multiple generations of family influence. Scholars know a good deal about how individual orientations toward vital beliefs like a sense of mastery (Pearlin et al. 1981), or related concepts including self-efficacy (Bandura 1986; Gecas 2003) and personal control (Mirowsky and Ross 2007), help individuals construct their lives. This study extends a contextual understanding of the development of these critical beliefs and orientations in two directions. First, it examines a range of family factors potentially related to adolescents' mastery beliefs, reaching beyond contemporary contexts to parents' earlier biography and their own adolescent development. Second, the study pairs this with a similar investigation of adolescents' life course expectations. These beliefs, that capture optimistic expectations about whether one's life will turn out well, are as important for predicting life course outcomes as are mastery beliefs (Hitlin and Johnson 2015).

Mastery and life course expectations form two components of subjective agency, a social psychological resource that youth can draw on in planning and pursuing successful futures (Hitlin and Elder 2007), and promoting their own well-being (Ben-Zur 2003). Reflecting adolescents' perceived capacities and perceived life chances, these sets of beliefs incorporate assessments of how one is doing in the here-and-now as well as how one will do in the future; they also incorporate an emotional aspect to perception, whether views of the future are more or less hopeful (Hitlin and Johnson 2015). Adolescents with strong mastery beliefs and optimistic assessments of what their futures have in store tend to be healthier, mentally and physically, achieve higher levels of education, earn more, and have fewer adult financial problems than other adolescents (Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Johnson and Hitlin 2017; Mirowsky and Ross 1998, 2007). As with many social psychological orientations, scholars know less about where this sense of agency comes from than how it plays out across the life course. Yet both are key social psychological mechanisms involved in reproducing inequality (Johnson and Hitlin 2017; Lee and Mortimer 2009; Shanahan and Bauer 2004; Wolinsky et al. 2003). As considered below, these agentic orientations develop more strongly in higher socioeconomic status families, and they contribute to adult attainment and well-being.

This study draws on multigenerational data to examine family influence on adolescent children's mastery beliefs and life course expectations. Three broad ways that parents shape the development of these agentic orientations are considered. The first focuses on contemporaneous family life, with the study examining two key dimensions: the socioeconomic status of families and the quality of relationships between parents and children. The second looks back to the parents' biography, considering educational,

employment, and family formation aspects of their own transition to adulthood. Finally, the third view looks further back in parents' lives to their own beliefs in adolescence more than 20 years earlier. Thus, the study begins to specify how much of the influences on adolescents' orientations comes from recent vs. distal structural and interactional factors.

Importance of Agentic Orientations in Adolescence

Adolescent orientations are important influences on subsequent life outcomes. Mastery is perhaps the most commonly studied general orientation, alongside related concepts of self-efficacy and personal control, all capturing the extent to which people feel able to influence their environments and their lives (see Haidt and Rodin 1999; Ross and Mirowsky 2013 for overviews). Such beliefs develop early in life (Schulz and Heckhausen 1999; Schulz, Wrosch and Heckhausen 2003), and are positively related to important beneficial adult outcomes (see Gecas 2003 for an overview). Childhood self-control, a related capacity assessed by others instead of the self, is likewise an important predictor of a variety of outcomes, including substance abuse, financial success, health and criminal offending (Moffitt et al. 2011). Less is known about the development of mastery through adolescence, however (Conger et al. 2009); many studies on its development focus on proximal factors, with less attention to social structural or intergenerational forces (e.g., the collected papers in Messer 2016).

Similarly, although lesser studied, life course expectations also develop in adolescence (Jessor, Donovan and Costa 1996; Halleröd 2011; Hitlin and Johnson 2015). "Generalized life expectations" express perceived chances of success across life domains (e.g., having a good job, good friends, good health, owning a home; Johnson and Hitlin 2017), factors relevant to adolescent anticipation of the future (Nurmi 1991). These beliefs capture the extent to which people look ahead in their lives with more or less optimism (Peterson 2000), and predict beneficial life course outcomes, net of socioeconomic and demographic factors (Halleröd 2011; Hitlin and Johnson 2015). Related expectations about the future regarding schooling, as well as those about survival, are associated cross-sectionally with lower substance use and violent and nonviolent antisocial behavior (Brumley et al. 2017; Haynie et al. 2014) and longitudinally with reduced sexually risky and violent behavior (Brumley et al. 2017; Sipsma et al. 2015).

Little work explores the extent to which generalized life expectations are related to the personality construct of general optimism, a factor that can also influence life course outcomes net of socioeconomic predictors (Roberts et al. 2007). Scheier and Carver's (1985) scale, for example, also taps "generalized expectations of the occurrence of good outcomes in one's life" (p. 239). The scale has demonstrated adequate discriminate validity (Scheier, Carver and Bridges 1994) and is related to improved health outcomes (Scheier and Carver 1987). Whereas the scale items tap optimistic expectations generally (e.g., "overall I expect more good things to happen to me than bad," "if something can go wrong for me it will" [reversed]), it differs from generalized life course expectations with the latter's focus on achieving the "good life" across domains (e.g., a good job, a home, good friends). So while they are likely related, it is difficult to say how closely in the absence of empirical evaluation. Extant research on the development of optimism at this stage in the life course

demonstrates modest continuity into adulthood (Caspi and Roberts 2001), suggesting an important mechanism for the unfolding of a life across multiple social domains. Such stability may occur for generalized life expectations as well.

Mastery and expectations represent two aspects of life course agency that facilitate advantageous long-term planning and persevering in the face of potential obstacles (Hitlin and Johnson 2015). Adolescents with stronger mastery beliefs and more optimistic life expectations experience better well-being and health in the transition to adulthood, net of sociodemographic controls (Hitlin and Johnson 2015). Different scholars have combined these concepts in different ways, finding that holding higher levels of these two dimensions contribute to setting up and pursuing long-term goals (Sun and Shek 2012), and to life resilience (Herman-Stahl and Petersen 1996).

Contemporary Family Influence

Three broad ways in which parents may influence their children's agentic orientations are considered. This discussion begins with the most proximate factors, contemporaneous family resources and dynamics, moving afterwards to parents' histories and their own early life orientations. Figure 1 provides a concise conceptual model.

Most attention to intergenerational influence centers on contemporaneous parental attainments, beliefs and behaviors. Parents are theorized to shape their children's orientations and achievements by the material and emotional resources available for parenting as well as their goals for their children. One aspect of contemporary family life that has clear documented effects on adolescent agentic orientations is parents' own attainments. Adolescents from higher socioeconomic status families develop stronger mastery beliefs (Conger et al. 2009; Lewis, Ross & Mirowsky 1999). Advantaged structural positions support the perspective that an individual can successfully navigate and influence his or her circumstances. "Beliefs about personal control are often realistic perceptions of objective conditions" (Ross and Mirowsky 2013 p. 383). At the same time, socioeconomic status of origin may be more weakly related to mastery in adolescence than socioeconomic status later in adulthood when status becomes lodged in one's own attainments (Finch et al. 1991). Income, education, occupational autonomy, and lack of job disruptions are associated with higher levels of efficacy or greater sense of control in adults (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983; Ross and Mirowsky 2013).

Though less studied, positive expectations about how one's life will turn out are also rooted in parents' advantaged structural positions. At a very basic level, even expecting to live beyond age 35, adolescents are more optimistic if they stem from higher socioeconomic status families and live in higher social class neighborhoods (Swisher and Warner 2013). Adolescents from higher socioeconomic status families also hold more optimistic generalized life expectations (Johnson and Hitlin 2017). People from elite backgrounds tend to perpetuate those advantages across generations (Kahn 2012), and evidence suggests that individual beliefs are a part of this process.

Parent-child relationship quality is central to adolescent development broadly (e.g., Bowlby 2008), and as would be expected, to mastery beliefs more specifically. Prior studies indicate

that close, supportive relationships with parents are associated with the development of mastery among adolescents (Ben-Zur 2003; Falci 2011; Finch et al. 1991). Adolescents whose parents discuss rules and decisions with their children and avoid harsh punishment also demonstrate stronger mastery and control beliefs (Whitbeck et al. 1997).

Less is known about the more forward-looking and emotionally-valenced dimension of generalized life expectations, though family culture can have long-lasting, multi-generational positive influences (Cairns et al. 1998; Mortimer et al. 2017). Positive parental relationships are correlated with stronger dispositional optimism in cross-sectional studies (e.g., Ben-Zur 2003). In a community sample of children (ages 8-11), mothers' reports of autonomy granting and moderate levels of behavioral control were linked to children's greater optimism (generalized expectations for success scale), but other dimensions of parenting including support were not (Hasan and Power 2002). The high socioeconomic status of the sample, as well as social desirability bias in reports of maternal support, however, may explain the null findings. Timing may matter on some of these dimensions of parenting; in a study comparing 10-11 and 14-15 year olds, Nurmi and Pulliainen (1991) found parental control negatively related to children's optimism about the future at the younger age only, though it increased children's concrete future-oriented steps taken toward goal achievement. High levels of communication with parents were related to positive outlooks at the older ages, as well as steps taken toward goal achievement.

Parental Biography

An interactionist understanding of adolescent development (Conger et al. 2010; Conger and Donnellan 2007) includes the important role of parental socioeconomic attainments and family dynamics, but also recognizes distal or long-standing individual differences in personal characteristics that themselves shape adult attainments, family dynamics and child outcomes. The interactionist model directs attention beyond contemporary circumstances to families' histories and to older family members' earlier development. Consistent with this, studies show that beyond what is currently going on in the family — parental resources and the relationships they have with their adolescent children — parental pathways may also matter for their children's development (Mortimer et al. 2017). The idea of “biographical structuration” in life course sociology likewise directs attention to the ways in which events and experiences earlier in life constrain one's current and future life net of current conditions (Schafer et al. 2011).

With respect to parental influence on the development of agentic orientations, earlier events and pathways in parents' lives may indirectly shape child outcomes through contemporary attainments and family dynamics, but may also matter in ways not fully channeled through contemporary factors (i.e. through indirect and direct pathways as shown in Figure 1). For example, parents' early decisions about school and work may matter for children because they strongly influence eventual educational attainment and adult income levels. Yet these earlier experiences may also shape the cognitive and financial resources individuals enter parenthood with, shaping the developmental environment for children over longer periods of time, even if later socioeconomic circumstances change. In the context of academic orientations, Taylor and colleagues (2004) argue that parents' have “working models” of

school based in their own past experiences that shape their education-related socialization of children. In this way, various aspects of the parents' history of experience matters, and not just their education level. Indeed, the parent's history may form a narrative that communicates to the child models for building successful lives. This is consistent with Schafer and colleagues' (2011) discussion of biographical structuration as operating in part through memory and narrative.

In sum, parents' own transition to adulthood experiences serve as a context that can set in motion processes influencing their own adult attainments and quality relationships with their children. They may also shape the goals, behaviors, and resources they have had for parenting over a longer period of time and to which the child has had long-term exposure. In addition, they may also convey messages about the chances of building a good life for oneself over time. Research on such processes is limited, as data are rarely available on parents' longer histories, especially before they became parents.

Intergenerational Development

Looking even earlier, parents' own orientations developed early in life can influence their children's developing agentic beliefs. Cairns et al. (1998) call parallels between children and their parents-as-adolescents "intergenerational development." Indirectly, parents' adolescent orientations may matter because they shape parents' early adult lives and ultimate socioeconomic attainments (Hitlin and Johnson 2015) and approaches to parenting (see Figure 1). There may be more direct effects as well. Although the current study cannot separate the mechanisms involved, there are several possibilities. Links between parents' orientations in adolescence and their children's orientations later could be transmitted genetically. Parents' orientations in adolescence may also be fairly stable into adulthood, with children exposed to parents' beliefs about their own capacities and life chances throughout childhood. Parents' early orientations may also signify particular family cultures, perhaps across multiple generations, with messages to children conveying their ability to influence their environments and build successful lives; children may also witness manifestations of such beliefs in daily life.

Research on intergenerational development is limited, as the long-term multigenerational data required to examine it is not readily available (Cairns et al. 1998), but several key studies are informative. Cairns et al (1998) document significant positive correlations between mothers' academic competence as children and their own children's academic competence, though this pattern did not extend to aggressive behavior. Mortimer and colleagues (2017) also recently found parallels between parents and children at the same ages in academic self-concept, the personal sense that one is intelligent and competent in school. This intergenerational association held even after considering parents' adult attainments and expectations for their child. Findings were again mixed for intergenerational development, however, as educational expectations in adolescence did not show significant association across the generations. Duncan and colleagues (2005) also document significant correlations between mothers' school activities, delinquent behavior and social psychological measures in adolescence and early adulthood with their children's corresponding later outcomes.

Bengtson, Biblarz and Roberts (2002) suggest that recent generations of families are more interdependent than previous ones, with parental influences being more important in developing well-being among their children. Adkins and Vaisey (2009), in a different context, suggest that individual orientations are more likely to influence behavior in those societies with more potential mobility; when people have little freedom in status attainment, their dispositions are not going to influence outcomes. Similarly, it can be hypothesized that parental orientations will be most influential in situations where socioeconomic resources are not enough of a support. The current study's analysis of a relatively lower socioeconomic status set of parents in the U.S. is, as such, appropriate for exploring these ideas. Consistent with the intergenerational development idea, the model tests whether parents who developed strong mastery beliefs and optimistic views of their futures when they were adolescents foster such beliefs in their children. This argument suggests the possibility of an interaction effect as well, however. The association between parents' adolescent orientations and their children's may depend on whether the family's current socioeconomic position strongly fosters mastery beliefs and optimistic expectations or not. When daily experience structured by privilege provides feedback to adolescents that they are able to control their environment and are likely to have success in life, parental beliefs may be redundant. But in its absence, parents' general agentic orientations may be more influential.

Current Study

The current study examines three ways in which parents influence their adolescent children's agentic orientations, as captured by mastery beliefs and generalized life expectations. First, contemporaneous parental socioeconomic attainments and quality relationships with their children are expected to be associated with higher mastery and more optimistic generalized life expectations. Second, parents' transition to adulthood experiences are expected to predict adolescent children's agentic orientations as well. This is anticipated to occur not only through later socioeconomic attainments and parent-child relationship quality, but also because experiences in early adulthood with education, employment, and family formation shape the longer-term context in which children are raised, through the resources parents have over time, through the examples parents become to their children, and through the ways parents' experiences inform their everyday approach to navigating situations and planning for the future. Third, the study tests the intergenerational development hypothesis, which states that parents' own agentic orientations in adolescence will be positively correlated with their adolescent children's orientations years later. Again this is expected to occur partially through the intermediate experiences of the transition to adulthood as well as current socioeconomic status and parent-child relationships. An intergenerational linkage in these orientations is expected to remain unaccounted for by these intermediate factors, however. This linkage may arise from genetic heritability, stability of parental orientations over time, or from family culture shared across generations that communicates ideas about agency and navigating and building one's life. These expected direct and indirect pathways are portrayed in Figure 1. Finally, considering contemporary and past factors together, the association between parents' agentic orientations in adolescence and their adolescent children's agentic orientations is expected to be stronger when current socioeconomic attainments are lower.

Methods

Sample

The data come from the Youth Development Study (YDS), in which a cohort of adolescents has been surveyed into adulthood; more recently, their children have also been surveyed. YDS began with a randomly chosen panel of 1,139 ninth grade students enrolled in St. Paul, Minnesota, public schools in 1988. Participants (64 percent of those invited) completed annual questionnaires in their classrooms between 1988 and 1991. Those not present completed questionnaires by mail, and data were collected by mail nearly every year thereafter. The retention rate through 2009 was 62.5 percent.

In 2008, recruitment began for children 11 and older whose parents had participated in recent survey waves. The first data collection (a mailed survey) from these children occurred in 2009, with 277 respondents. Additional children were recruited for the second and third waves of the child study (including those who turned 11, as well as older children who had not enrolled previously). By 2011, 67% of the eligible parents had allowed their children to participate and 422 children had completed at least one of three surveys. In the analyses presented here, child data came from the 2011 survey; when that data was not available, measures from 2010 or 2009 surveys were substituted. The children's data thus derive from the most recent survey (82% of child data came from 2011).

The sample for the current study includes the 422 children who completed at least one survey (2009-2011), together with their parents from the original study. For the parents, data were from 1991, when most were seniors in high school, through 2009, when the first of their children were surveyed. By virtue of the study design, this subsample of YDS participants is of lower socioeconomic status than the panel at large because it overrepresents relatively early child-bearers (teens through age 27 at the time of the study children's births). Just 21% of consenting parents had a 4-year college degree, in comparison to almost 35% of the full panel.

Several aspects about the historical period covered by the Youth Development Study are worth noting. The years in which both parents' and adolescents' agentic orientations were measured were recession years in the U.S. (1991 and 2009-2011, with another recession occurring in between, in 2001). Economic changes related to advancements in technology, globalization, and other factors that began in the 1970s continued across the years between parents' adolescence and their children's adolescence. As the economic pay-off to education increased across these years, adolescents' aspirations for college and graduate degrees increased (Goyette 2008). A trend of rising inequality continued, with some, although not extensive, change in public beliefs about opportunity and mobility mechanisms in the U.S. (McCall 2016).

The Youth Development Study offers several rare advantages for our research. In addition to having similar measurement of concepts for both parents and children, the more than two decades' worth of archived data on the parents facilitates 1) an examination of mastery and generalized life expectations measured at approximately the same ages across generations,

and 2) an examination of parents' pathways from adolescence through the transition to adulthood as sources of influence on their children.

Measures

Adolescents' Agentic Orientations—Both mastery and future life course expectations were measured in the child survey (2009-2011). The Pearlin mastery scale (Pearlin et al. 1981) includes seven positively and negatively worded items such as “What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me,” “I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life,” and “There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life,” rated on a scale from 1 to 4 and reversed as necessary so that high scores indicate higher mastery. Generalized life expectations were measured using 8 of the 10 items from the Perceived Life Chances Scale (Jessor, Donovan and Costa 1988). This scale asks respondents “Thinking about how you see your future, what are the chances that...” and response items include, for example, “you will have a job that pays well,” “You will have a happy family life,” and “You will be respected in your community” rated on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). (See Table 1 for full set of items.) Eight items from this scale were utilized because Johnson and Hitlin (2017) show the ten items support two subscales, with the two items dropped having little impact on future observed outcomes.¹ Both mastery and life course expectations were treated as latent constructs measured by multiple observed indicators.² In a measurement model without predictors, these latent constructs were moderately positively correlated ($r = .36$).

Parents' Contemporary Socioeconomic Status—Parents' socioeconomic status was measured in the 2009 adult survey (age 35-36) by parents' educational attainment and household income. Parental educational attainment was measured by an ordinal scale, from (1) elementary or junior high school to (6) Ph.D. or professional degree. Household income was measured for the calendar year prior (2008) and respondents were instructed to report the combined income for all household members, before taxes. These reports were then transformed using the natural logarithm.

Contemporary Parent-Child Relationship Quality—The quality of the relationships children have with their parents is based on child responses to six questions about their mothers and fathers (2009-2011). Adolescent children were asked how much they wanted to be like the kind of person their parent is, how close they feel to him/her, how often they do things with their parent that they enjoy, whether they talk over things with the parent when they have concerns or decisions to make, whether the parent talks to them about important decisions, and how often the parent listens to their side of an argument; all scales ran from 1-4. Parent-child relationship quality is treated as a latent variable in the structural equation model. These questions were not asked from the parent's point of view.

¹The two items ask about perceived chances that “life will turn out better for you than it has for your parents” and “your children will have a better life than you have.” These intergenerational mobility beliefs in adolescence were not independently predictive of a range of attainment, health, and well-being outcomes in the years following.

²Latent variable factor loadings on these constructs, measured both for parents and children, ranged from .4 to .8 (standardized). Hitlin and Johnson (2015) examine mastery and life expectations additively and with latent classes representing their combinations. They find that when it comes to their impact on the subsequent life course, treating these constructs as latent classes does not offer any additional explanatory power and that the constructs can be modeled side-by-side.

Parents' Biography—Measures of the parents' biography characterizing the transition to adulthood in the domains of education, work, and family life, were selected to capture key elements that were not duplicative of adult attainments (measures described above) so that biographical structuration could be examined as well as whether these experiences shape child outcomes indirectly through contemporary attainments. In the domain of education, the measure indicated whether the parent had attended at least six months of postsecondary education within the first two years after on-time high school graduation. Highlighting early attendance captures a normatively timed pursuit of higher education. In the work domain, time spent unemployed was measured, as well as average household income in the years until 1998 (age 26). For unemployment, data was used from life history calendars that registered a series of activities monthly (not employed and looking for work) each year from 1991 to 1998, taking the average number of months per year the respondent reported unemployment. Household income was measured for the first time in 1995 (a report of 1994 annual income) and thus average household income is for six years (1994-1998). In the realm of family life, the measure distinguished whether the child was born before the parent's first marriage. By the nature of the sample itself, all participants were relatively early parents; one of the more salient and variable aspects to their early lives as parents was likely their marital status.

Parents' Agentic Orientations in Adolescence—Measures of parents' mastery and generalized life expectations utilizing the exact same items as for their children are also available from parents' own adolescence, in 1991 when parents were mostly high school seniors. For a few parents who were missing information on these scales from 1991, 1990 information was substituted. Parents' mastery and generalized life course expectations were treated as latent variables in the model. Although mastery was measured on the original cohort again after adolescence (and so is available in 2009 for these parents as an indicator of contemporary beliefs), the generalized life course expectations were not measured again after 1991. Preliminary analyses examined the intergenerational association of parents' mastery beliefs in 2009 with their children's mastery and generalized life course expectations (both in 2009-2011), but found that they were not statistically significant, even for the bivariate case.

Controls—Child sex, race (white/nonwhite), current family structure (living in single parent family, two parent family, or step-parent and other type of family), and age were controlled in all models. It should be noted that because the original cohort (the parents) were sampled as 9th graders, there is little age variation. Thus parent age is not a relevant control variable, and child age also reflects the age of the parent when the child was born.³

Analytic Approach

A fully recursive structural equation model was estimated based on the conceptual model portrayed in Figure 1. Although not shown in the figure, correlations were included among variables within each conceptual block (e.g., the parents' transition to adulthood experiences

³The model included direct paths from these control variables to the two child outcomes and otherwise treated control variables as correlated with all other predictors.

were treated as interrelated but with no causal paths estimated between them). Interactions between parent's socioeconomic status (contemporary education and household income) and parents' adolescent orientations were tested one at a time in separate subsequent models. All models account for the clustering of multiple children in the same family, estimating robust standard errors. Multiple imputation was used to address a small amount of missing data (using 20 imputed datasets); the only measure with more than a few missing cases was parents' household income average 1994-1998, with 7% of cases missing data.

Results

Descriptive statistics on all study variables appear in Table 1. The sample of adolescent children is just under half male and nonwhite, and about age 15 on average. Just over one third live with their two biological (or adoptive) parents. The items for both mastery and generalized life expectations are a little higher among children than parents. Adolescent children report generally positive relationships with their parents, with the items rated just over or just under 3 on 4-point scales. Over 40 percent of parents obtained 6 or more months of postsecondary education in the first two years after high school and their average education level of 2.88 is in between a high school diploma and some postsecondary education short of a BA. Half of the adolescent children were born before their parents married.

Standardized estimates from the structural equation model appear in Table 2. Consistent with previous studies, parents' socioeconomic status is associated with stronger mastery and more optimistic life expectations. Even in a lower average socioeconomic status sample (tied to the study design, discussed above), parents who attained higher levels of education had adolescent children who were more confident in their skills to navigate and influence their environment, and higher income parents had adolescent children more confident that their lives will turn out well. What adolescents reported about their relationships with their parents were strongly and significantly related to both orientations as well; adolescents who reported closer, more enjoyable, and better communicating relationships with their parents registered more optimistic generalized life expectations and higher mastery beliefs. The latter relationship represents one of the strongest sources of influence in the model, with the magnitude of the unstandardized coefficient (not shown) being over two-thirds of a standard deviation in mastery beliefs. The coefficient for parent-child relationship quality and generalized life expectations is more modest, at about one-third of a standard deviation.

Looking back to the parents' transition to adulthood experiences, only parents marrying before the child was born had a significant direct effect on adolescent orientations years later. Whether the parent's transition to parenthood preceded marriage was directly related only to adolescent children's generalized life expectations. Adolescents whose parents had given birth to them before marrying were less optimistic about their own future life success than adolescents whose parents had married first. The unstandardized coefficient indicates this effect is fairly small, just under one-third of a standard deviation, although its total effect is larger. Parents' marital history (having the child before first marriage) had significant indirect effects on adolescents mastery ($p < .05$) and generalized life course expectations ($p < .$

05) through the quality of parent-child relations, which as noted above, was an important predictor of adolescent agentic orientations.

Family income during the early adult years and the extensiveness of unemployment experience were not related to either outcome for children. Although normatively on-time post-secondary educational investments had no direct effects on the adolescent orientations, it had a significant indirect effect on generalized life course expectations through parents' eventual educational attainment ($p < .05$) and household income ($p < .05$).

Finally, looking all the way back to parents' own orientations as adolescents, there is evidence of intergenerational development in the case of generalized life course expectations. Parents' generalized life course expectations measured 20 years earlier in their own adolescence had a significant direct effect on their children's generalized life course expectations. Those parents who were themselves more optimistic about their futures as adolescents had adolescent children who were also more optimistic. This link was largely direct; it, along with contemporary parental socioeconomic status and parent-child relationship quality were each related to adolescent development.⁴

Parents' mastery measured in adolescence did not significantly predict their children's later mastery directly or indirectly. In contrast to generalized life course expectations, there is no evidence of intergenerational development for mastery beliefs.

Although not the focus of the current study, it is interesting to note several patterns for the control variables. Adolescent boys had stronger mastery beliefs than their female age-peers; this was true of the cohort their parents were part of as well (Falci 2011). There were no significant gender differences in generalized life expectations, but there was a small significant difference by age, with older youth less optimistic. Consistent with educational expectations and those about future work as well, there may be some growing realism to adolescents' expectations for how well their lives will turn out as they mature (Johnson and Monserud 2012; Reynolds and Baird 2010). In contrast to previous studies, there were no family structure differences in adolescent mastery. Reduced form models examining the effects of family structure alone on adolescent mastery similarly produced non-significant differences. This may be due to aspects of this sample, driven by their relatively early transition to parenthood. It was more common in this sample for the children to have been born before marriage, and the parents were of relatively lower socioeconomic status, compared to national averages for this cohort.

The final set of analyses involved examining interactions between parents' socioeconomic status during their children's adolescence and their own earlier orientations when they were adolescents. Earlier orientations were expected to matter more when current resources did not support the development of strong agentic orientations. Family income and then parental education levels were specified to interact with each of these parental orientations. Although parental education levels did not significantly interact with parents' orientations in

⁴The total indirect effect from parents' generalized life expectations to adolescents' life expectations is small but statistically significant. No specific indirect path was itself statistically significant at conventional levels. The indirect effect through on-time post-secondary educational attendance and parental educational attainment was closest, significant only at the $p < .10$ level.

adolescence, contemporary family income significantly conditioned the relationships for parents' earlier generalized life expectations. Parental generalized life expectations were less strongly related to children's generalized life expectations and mastery beliefs at higher levels of household income (and were stronger at lower levels of household income). This suggests that optimistic orientations operated as substitutable resources; higher income fosters these agentic beliefs, but in their relative absence, parents own early orientations can also foster them. This relationship is graphed in Figure 2, showing the relationship between parental generalized life expectations and both dimensions of child agentic orientations predicted at two levels of current household income.⁵

Sensitivity Analyses

The sensitivity of these findings to several measurement decisions was examined, focusing on different strategies for characterizing the parents' transition to adulthood experiences. In addition to the dichotomy indicating early post-secondary educational attendance, a categorical measure distinguishing no months of post-secondary education, 6-12 months, and over 12 months was examined. Further distinction beyond 6 months added no explanatory power. Sensitivity analysis also explored multiple strategies for capturing parents' income during the years after high school, including lengthening the period of observation to 2002 and 2004, and measuring income for the child's first five years of life (regardless of calendar year). Finally, alternative specifications of unemployment experience were examined, including distinguishing experiencing any unemployment from none, and a count of years in which any unemployment occurred. None of these alternatives for capturing income and unemployment changed the findings, suggesting their lack of association with adolescents' orientations was not due to measurement decisions (within options provided by this data).

In addition, in order to further investigate intergenerational development for mastery, additional models were estimated dropping generalized life expectations (i.e. Figure 1 focused on mastery only), and then examining only the bivariate relationship between parents' earlier mastery and adolescent children's contemporary mastery. These models confirmed the lack of intergenerational linkages for mastery. In addition, parents' contemporary mastery (2009) was not related to their adolescent children's mastery. Generalized life course expectations were not measured again in the original cohort after the high school years. Thus it is not possible to do a parallel test on the contemporaneous intergenerational similarity in these expectations, nor assess how stable they were for parents from adolescence to adulthood.

⁵In order to produce predicted means graphed in Figure 2, we replicated the model which included interactions with latent variables with one using scales (taking the mean across the multiple observed items), because intercepts are only estimated in Mplus with observed dependent variables. Although the model coefficients varied slightly, they were similar in sign, magnitude, and statistical significance across the two specifications. All continuous variables other than parent generalized life expectations and household income were set to their mean and dichotomous variables were set to 1. Family structure was set as two biological/adoptive parents. The predicted means of the two child outcomes were then estimated based on the range of parent generalized life expectations for two household income groups: one represented incomes at one standard deviation above the mean and the other at one standard deviation below the mean.

Supplemental Analyses

Additional analyses were performed to determine whether mastery and generalized life course expectations in the full original cohort (parents in the current study are a subsample) predicted which participants became parents, and which participants became parents whose children participated in data collection (selective on how young parents had children as well as participation consent). Hillmert (2013) argues that this first question, of who even becomes a parent, is an often neglected piece in assessments of the social reproduction of inequality. This analysis indicated that neither the original cohort's mastery beliefs nor generalized life expectations predicted eventual parenthood status, but those with higher mastery beliefs as adolescents were less likely to have a child who participated in the study. Further analysis indicated that this bivariate association was related to the connection between the adult cohort's mastery beliefs in adolescence and their own gender and family of origin's socioeconomic status. As such, the parents in this study had lower mastery beliefs on average in adolescence than the wider sample from which they were derived.

Discussion

Adolescents' perceived capacities to navigate their daily lives successfully and their optimistic perceived life chances are resources that facilitate planning and goal setting, they help make many small decisions with larger goals in mind, and they promote persistence in the face of obstacles (Hitlin and Elder 2007). These agentic orientations are linked to better health and well-being for young people over time, net of sociodemographic background and other psychological resources (Ben-Zur 2003; Gecas 2003; Hitlin and Johnson 2015). The factors that shape the development of agentic orientations are not well understood, however, and attention to parental influences has focused primarily on contemporary resources and family dynamics, as well as rather singly on mastery beliefs.

This article expands on previous studies of how families influence the development of key social psychological resources important for children's own successful futures in two ways. First, it expands consideration of how parents shape their adolescent children's mastery beliefs by moving beyond contemporary factors to parents' own earlier biographies in the transition to adulthood and to their own beliefs developed in adolescence. Interactionist models in development (Cairns et al. 1998) and biographical structuration in life course sociology (Schafer et al. 2011) both speak to the relevance of parents' histories in understanding their influence on the next generation. Second, the study expands research on this cognitive appraisal of one's capacities to include generalized life expectations, which bring the temporality and emotion of hopeful futures into play. Drawing on data from the Youth Development Study over a twenty year period, this study thus examines longitudinal, multigenerational antecedents for both of these influential social psychological orientations for youth and adolescents.

Beginning with the earliest factors considered in this study, the findings indicate that parental generalized life expectations (back when they were adolescents themselves) were positively related to their adolescent children's generalized life expectations later, and that very little of this association operated indirectly through adult pathways, attainments, and relationships with children. Parents' adolescent mastery did not predict their children's later

mastery (even indirectly). A contemporaneous measure of parents' mastery was also not significantly associated with adolescent children's mastery. Although this was counter to expectation, at least one other study failed to find an association between parents' and youth's mastery beliefs, though it found no association for dispositional optimism either (Ben-Zur 2003). These findings on parents' and children's similarities measured over twenty years apart add to the literature on intergenerational development, which indicates to date that some, but not all, orientations and behaviors show parallels between parents-as-adolescents and their adolescent children (Cairns et al. 1998; Mortimer et al. 2017).

Future research is needed to understand which orientations and behaviors show intergenerational development and the mechanisms involved, with attention to several possibilities. Genetic heritability is one possibility that could not be examined with the Youth Development Study, though is increasingly recognized as relevant by social scientists. Stability of parents' orientations is another important possibility, as it may not be parents' earlier orientations that matter, but rather stable parental orientations that children are exposed to during their lifetimes. Finally, additional ways in which parents think, communicate and behave that may express their expected life chances need to be explored. Mental maps of how successful lives are constructed and whether "people like us" can achieve the "good life" may permeate daily interactions with children in ways not captured by our contemporaneous measures of parental attainments and parent-child relationship quality. Looking to the grandparent generation may be useful in identifying aspects of family culture that persist across generations.

The current study also examined key aspects of the parents' transition to adulthood to see whether parents' biographies were related to children's later agentic orientations. The findings generally indicate few significant relationships among the biographical experiences examined in this study. Marital histories, in relation to the timing of childbearing, had both direct and indirect effects on adolescents' agentic orientations, however. When their parents married before having them, adolescents held more optimistic generalized life expectations, net of contemporaneous measures of socioeconomic status and parent-child relationship quality. Adolescents whose parents married before having them also had better relationships with their parents, which was positively associated with both generalized life expectations and mastery beliefs. Thus, marriage-parenting sequences were indirectly linked to both adolescent outcomes. The only other aspect of the parents' transition to adulthood that was significantly related to either orientation was on-time post-secondary educational investments, and its association with generalized life course expectations was only indirect, through parents' contemporaneous socioeconomic achievements. Although it was reasonable to expect the timing of postsecondary education to matter in this sample of early childbearers, the strong connection between normatively on-time college-going and ultimate attainment fully explained the association.

Consistent with prior research and the focus of most intergenerational studies, contemporaneous aspects of family life were significantly associated with adolescents' agentic orientations. Past research finds socioeconomic status to be positively related to adolescents' mastery beliefs and generalized life expectations (Conger et al. 2009; Johnson and Hitlin 2017; Lewis, Ross & Mirowsky 1999), and the current study also found this

pattern in a relatively disadvantaged sample. Parent-child relationships matter as well, though prior research has focused much more so on mastery beliefs than generalized life expectations and other optimism-related concepts (Ben-Zur 2003; Falci 2011; Finch et al. 1991; Hasan and Power 2002; Nurmi and Pulliainen 1991; Whitbeck et al. 1997). As such, this study builds the base of knowledge about parenting and optimistic expectations as well. Adolescents with closer, better, relationships with their parents are more confident in their capacities for action and more optimistic about their futures.

Finally, the current study documents an important pattern relating parental orientations early in life, contemporary resources, and their children's development. Parental adolescent generalized life expectations were more strongly related to both dimensions of their adolescent children's agentic orientations when parents had lower incomes in adulthood. These findings demonstrate the important interplay between biography and inequality across generations. Parental optimism may be a redundant resource for children whose higher income families position them to develop skills to better navigate their daily life and anticipate successful lives. But in the absence of such an advantageous social location, parental orientations may substitute.

Even though this study drew on a rare longitudinal dataset that allows novel exploration of the social antecedents of these important adolescent orientations, the data also had limitations. The Youth Development Study did not include contemporary measures of parental generalized life expectations, only what they reported as adolescents. As such, there is no means for testing the concurrent association between generalized life expectations intergenerationally, nor the degree of stability in these expectations from adolescence to adulthood. Also, as yet, the study has not followed the child generation into adulthood, and it cannot be assumed that generalized life expectations and mastery will operate the same way in the contemporary life course context as it did for earlier generations. Generalization from this study's findings are also limited, given that it originated with adolescents in one Midwestern city of the U.S. in the early 1990s. Although the adolescents were randomly selected to participate, they did not constitute a nationally representative sample, and their children are even less of one.

Conclusion

This study finds that adolescents are more optimistic when their parents were also optimistic at their age, offering some support to the idea that children's outcomes can stem from long-term processes in parents' lives. The same does not hold true for strong mastery beliefs, but parents' optimistic life course expectations held in adolescence are more strongly related to adolescent children's life course expectations *and mastery beliefs* when current family incomes were lower. This pattern of findings lends support to the idea that parents' orientations and current structural supports for agentic beliefs are at least somewhat substitutable. Adolescent children's generalized life expectations are also more optimistic when their parents married before having them, net of current relationship quality and socioeconomic attainment. Given the documented associations optimistic generalized life expectations and dispositional optimism have with later positive outcomes (Carver, Scheier, and Serverstrom 2010; Johnson and Hitlin 2017), families being able to inculcate it in their

children points to additional social psychological mechanisms in the reproduction of inequality (Kohn and Schooler 1983; Lareau 2011). This study thus contributes to knowledge about long-term, intergenerational processes involved in the promotion of beneficial social psychological resources among adolescents, pointing toward several new directions of study that can improve our understanding of adolescent socioemotional and productive development.

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Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Figure 2. Conditional Influence of Parent GLE in Adolescence by Current Household Income

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics on Study Measures, Youth Development Study

Measures	% or Mean (SD)
Child Generation in Adolescence (2009-2011)	
Male	46.4
White	51.9
Family Structure	
Two biological/adoptive parents	37.6
Single parent	34.4
Other family structures	28.0
Age	15.55 (2.73)
Mastery (1=strongly disagree; 4=strongly agree)	
There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have (reversed)	2.89 (.81)
Sometimes I feel that I'm being pushed around in life (reversed)	2.73 (.80)
I have little control over the things that happen to me (reversed)	2.85 (.78)
I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do	3.20 (.69)
What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me	3.35 (.64)
I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life (reversed)	2.86 (.80)
There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life (reversed)	2.95 (.80)
Generalized Life Expectations (GLE; 1=very low; 5=very high)	
You will have a job that pays well	3.98 (.86)
You will be able to own your own home	4.04 (.93)
You will have a job that you enjoy doing	4.04 (.88)
You will have a happy family life	4.13 (.87)
You will be in good health most of the time	4.12 (.83)
You will be able to live wherever you want to in the country	3.67 (1.09)
You will be respected in your community	3.99 (.87)
You will have good friends you can count on	4.28 (.84)
Parent-Child Relationship Quality	
How much do you want to be like the kind of person s/he is when you are older?	2.74 (.89)
How close do you feel to her/him?	3.22 (.88)
How often do you do things with your mother/father than you enjoy?	3.23 (.75)
When you are faced with personal concerns and decisions, do you talk them over with her/him?	2.91 (.93)
How often does s/he talk over important decisions s/he has to make with you?	2.88 (.92)
How often does s/he listen to your side of an argument?	3.04 (.92)
Parent Generation in Adolescence (1991)	
Mastery (1=strongly disagree; 4=strongly agree)	
There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have (reversed)	2.76 (.77)
Sometimes I feel that I'm being pushed around in life (reversed)	2.52 (.75)
I have little control over the things that happen to me (reversed)	2.91 (.76)
I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do	3.21 (.62)
What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me	3.37 (.62)

Measures	% or Mean (SD)
I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life (reversed)	2.56 (.79)
There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life (reversed)	2.96 (.74)
Generalized Life Expectations (GLE; 1=very low; 5=very high)	
You will have a job that pays well	3.71 (.83)
You will be able to own your own home	3.65 (1.05)
You will have a job that you enjoy doing	3.92 (.93)
You will have a happy family life	4.04 (.94)
You will be in good health most of the time	4.01 (.80)
You will be able to live wherever you want to in the country	3.59 (1.12)
You will be respected in your community	3.75 (.82)
You will have good friends you can count on	4.07 (.86)
Parent Generation Transition to Adulthood (1991-2000)	
Postsecondary education (≥ 6 months spring 1991-spring 1993)	42.3
Average months of unemployment (1991-1998)	.92 (1.55)
Average Household Income (logged 2008 dollars, 1994-1998)	9.27 (2.23)
Child's birth was before first marriage	49.9
Parent Generation in Adulthood (2009)	
Educational Attainment	2.88 (.84)
Household Income (2008; logged)	10.35 (2.41)

N = 422 adolescents and their 265 parents

Table 2

Standardized estimates from structural equation model predicting adolescent children's generalized life expectations and mastery beliefs.

	Child GLE	Child Mastery	Parent Education	Household Income	Parent- Child Relationship	PS Educ (6 mo +)	Mean months unemployed	Mean income 1994-98	Birth before marriage
<i>Parent Contemporary</i>									
Parent Education	.11 ⁺	.14 [*]							
Household income	.13 ^{**}	.04							
Parent-child relationship	.17 ^{**}	.35 ^{***}							
<i>Parent Transition to Adulthood</i>									
PS Educ (6 mo ⁺)	.00	.03	.51 ^{***}	.11 [*]	.04				
Mean months unemployed	.07	.05	.02	-.03	-.07				
Mean income 1994-98	.02	.01	-.04	.23 ^{***}	-.02				
Birth before marriage	-.14 [*]	.03	-.07	-.19 ^{***}	-.20 ^{***}				
<i>Parent in Adolescence</i>									
Parent mastery	-.02	-.09	-.11	.01	-.09	-.07	.09	-.10	.05
Parent GLE	.15 [*]	.08	.23 ^{**}	.00	.10	.39 ^{***}	-.27 ^{**}	.20 [*]	-.13
<i>Controls^a</i>									
Child male	-.08	.11 [*]							
Child white	-.07	.00							
Two parents	-.11	-.01							
Single parent	-.05	.02							
Other family structure (ref) Child age	-.12 [*]	.03							
R-square	.20	.17	.39	.14	.08	.13	.06	.03	.01

^a Direct paths were estimated between controls and adolescent mastery and generalized life expectations. Otherwise control variables were specified as being correlated with all other variables in the model (coefficients not shown).

N = 422 adolescents and their 265 parents.

⁺ p<.10;
^{*} p<.05;
^{**} p<.01;

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