FAMILY AND LIFE STRESSORS PREDICT ADOLESCENTS’ SOCIAL BEHAVIORS VIA PARENTING AND MORAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the current studies was to examine the associations between family-level stressors and low-income adolescents’ social behaviors. Previous theory and research has suggested that stress can be emotionally and cognitively debilitating and lead to lower levels of positive social behaviors, such as helping behaviors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Alternatively, theorists have suggested that traumatic stressors may foster emotional sensitivity and ultimately contribute to higher levels of moral behaviors (Staub, 2007). In order to better understand the associations between stressors and adolescents’ moral behaviors, two studies were conducted. Study 1 was a mixed-methods study of adolescents from Camden, NJ and St. Joseph, MO (Camden: n = 19, M age = 15.38, 72.2% girls; St. Joseph: n = 15, M age = 16.27, 65.5 % girls). The results demonstrated complex associations between stressors and adolescents’ moral identity.

Study 2 extended study 1 by examining the associations between economic stressors and life events and adolescents’ prosocial and aggressive behaviors via parenting practices (use of social and material rewards) and adolescents’ moral identity. The sample consisted of 198 adolescents from St. Joseph, MO (M age = 16.22, 34.8 % girls, 84.1 % White). The results demonstrated that stressors were differentially associated with parental rewards, which were in turn associated with social behaviors. Discussion will focus on the roles of parenting processes and moral identity in explaining links between stress and youth outcomes.