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Effects of Family Structure on Compulsive Buying: A Life Course Perspective

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Compulsive buying has been a topic of great interest to researchers and policy makers for decades because it is believed to affect the well-being of millions of U.S. consumers. It can be viewed as form of maladaptive behavior, as it correlates strongly with other forms of compulsive behaviors, such as alcoholism and eating disorders (Faber et al. 1995), which are considered maladaptive phenomena (e.g., Simmons et al. 2002). Although it is recognized that compulsive behavior is rooted (at least partly) in early-life experiences (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 1997), little is known about the processes that link early-life experiences to this form of consumer behavior (Rindfleisch et al. 1997).

The life course paradigm offers a viable framework for studying childhood-adulthood links because it suggests that behavior is embedded with circumstances one has experienced at earlier stages in life. It has been used to study similar phenomena of maladaptive behavior such as binge eating and drinking (e.g., Simmons et al. 2002). This paper uses the life course framework as a blueprint for organizing, integrating, and developing a theory-driven model to explain compulsive buying. A model of compulsive buying that has appeared in leading scientific journals (Rindfleisch et al. 1997) is also tested and compared to the life course model, using a sample and measures similar to those used by its builders. The results suggest that previous efforts to study this consumption phenomenon could be better understood in the context of the broader multi-theoretical life course paradigm.

The life course paradigm suggests that biological and psychological changes during an individual's life and social demands across the life course that are defined by typical life events and social roles create physical, social, and emotional demands and circumstances to which one must adapt. This adaptation entails the processes of socialization, stress and coping, and development and growth or decline. These processes are the underlying change mechanisms of the three most widely-accepted life-course perspectives: normative (socialization), stress, and human capital, respectively (Moschis 2007).

Previous research finds that young consumers from disrupted homes have higher compulsive buying tendencies than those from intact homes (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 1997), viewing stress as the mechanism or process that links family disruption to compulsive buying. In contrast, the life course paradigm suggests a number of causal mechanisms relating family structure to the child's problem behavior in general and compulsive buying in particular. According to this paradigm, compulsive buying tendencies may be the result of not only stressful experiences of disruptive family events (as suggested by the stress perspective); they may also be attributed to negative consequences these family events have on the child's socialization experiences (as suggested by the normative perspective) and his or her psychological development (as suggested by the human capital perspective). Because the various disciplinary approaches to life course research are complementary, the life course paradigm provides a framework for integrating diverse theoretical perspectives

into a multi-theoretical model, which is consistent with recent efforts of life course researchers to develop models that include variables derived from diverse theories (e.g., Mortimer and Shanahan 2003). Thus, based on the power of the life course paradigm to integrate multiple theoretical perspectives, we draw from each of the three theoretical perspectives to provide an integrated model to explain compulsive buying.

The results generally support the life course model, helping us see the contributions of each perspective to our understanding of compulsive buying tendencies. They highlight the mechanisms that may link family disruptions to compulsive buying, beyond those suggested by previous research that has assume stress as an explanation. Specifically, our data suggest that family disruption events experienced in formative years leads to the depletion of socioeconomic resources that interfere with socialization practices and deter human capital development due to ineffective parent-child communications. The youth's experience of stressors from living in disrupted family settings and their experience of socioeconomic deprivation appear to be responsible for the social processes—interactions with peers and parents who stress conformity rather than self-direction and attempt to exercise a greater control over their child's activities, which are fostered in such family settings. These processes appear to put the child at risk of developing compulsive buying tendencies.

Although earlier research has suggested the possibility of mechanisms (other than stress) for the development of compulsive consumer behaviors, such as family socialization practices (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 1997), research along these suggested directions has been hampered due to a lack of theoretical frameworks. The present study shows how earlier research on compulsive buying can be examined within the broader life course paradigm.

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