



Investigating the role of alienation in a multicomponent model of juvenile delinquency

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Research findings indicate that there are multiple causal pathways to delinquency. A multicomponent model of delinquency was developed to explore systematically the interrelationships of psychosocial variables and their relationships to delinquent behaviour. Most importantly, alienation was tested for its ability to act as a core mediating predictor variable. One hundred and fifty-two adolescents, 78 females and 74 males, completed a battery of questionnaires designed to assess each of the variables in the proposed model. Several salient pathways to delinquency were identified. They include environmental and person-centred factors. Alienation, when operationalized as a general construct, was not found to be a necessary mediating predictor variable. “Societal” alienation, on the other hand, was shown to have important explanatory power. Re-examining the model within a large-scale, time-extended study could inform programmes for the prevention and early intervention of delinquent behaviour.

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Introduction

A great deal of theoretical and research attention has been devoted to understanding the factors that influence engagement in delinquent behaviour. A widely held view is that the term juvenile delinquency encompasses a range of acts or offences, from those that are typically regarded as not very serious to those that are held to be extremely serious (e.g. [Hirschi et al., 1980](#); [Mak, 1993](#)). Consistent with that belief, in the present study “juvenile delinquency” refers to both marginally deviant and highly serious acts. Recent attention has been focused on theoretical integration and on the exploration of the relationships among the individual, familial and social structural factors (e.g. [Scholte, 1992](#); [O'Donnell et al., 1995](#)). Although those models clearly extend single variation explanations, they have tended in general to assume that the predictor variables influence delinquent behaviour directly, neglecting to elucidate intervening mechanisms between the predictor variables and delinquency.

The principal purpose of the present study was to investigate whether the variables in a proposed model of juvenile delinquency, separately and interactively, are mediated via adolescent alienation. It is not an easy task to provide a precise definition of the term “alienation” because it has been used to refer to a number of psychological states. What unites the various meanings attributed to the term, however, is the notion of alienation as an individual's sense of separation or estrangement from society, work, themselves or significant others ([Calabrese and Adams, 1990](#)).

A psychosocial model of engagement in adolescent delinquent behaviour was formulated

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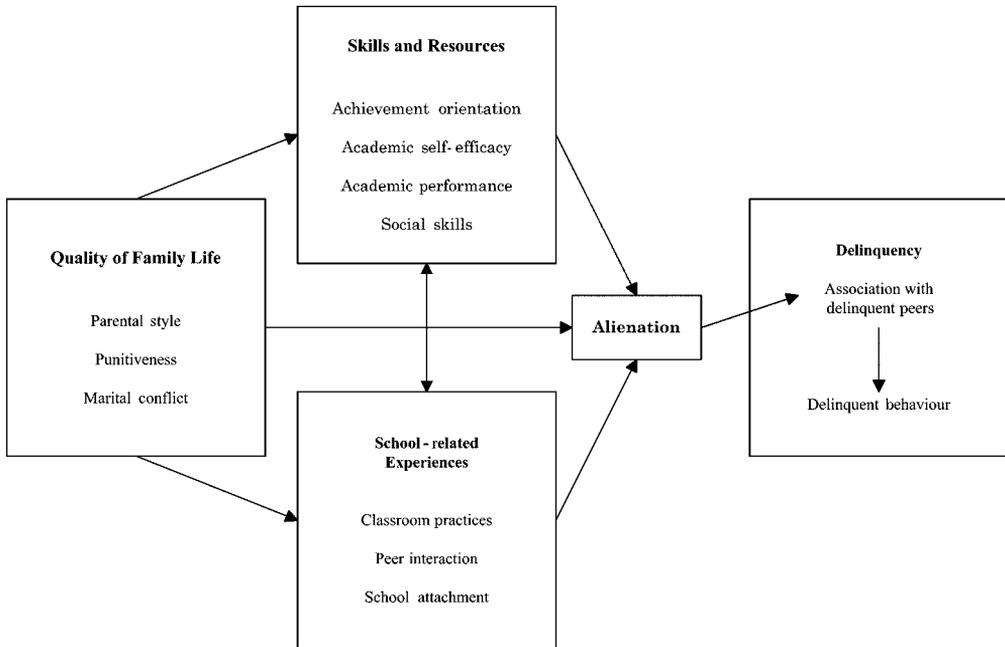


Figure 1. Model showing relationships between delinquency, alienation, and environmental and individual difference variables.

within the broad context of adolescent development, with particular focus on the family, peers and school, and is presented in Figure 1.

The model represented in Figure 1 proposes that delinquent behaviour is a direct function of association with delinquent peers, and that alienation from conventional society leads to association with the delinquent reference group and, in turn, to delinquent behaviour. Thus, while alienation was assumed to operate as a crucial mediating predictor variable, association with delinquent peers was hypothesized as the most immediate precursor to delinquent behaviour.

There is empirical support for the claim that there is an association between alienation and delinquency. When Calabrese and Adams (1990) compared delinquents and non-delinquents, for example, higher levels of alienation existed among the delinquent group. Their study was, however, cross-sectional in nature, and so the causal direction of the relationship between alienation and delinquency was not established. Yet adolescents who feel alienated from or rejected by the wider society have been found to drift into an association with a deviant peer group that includes adolescents who have been similarly rejected (Patterson and Dishion, 1985). Once that association has occurred, delinquent behaviour seems to follow inevitably because delinquent acts are typically committed in the company of others (Emler and Reicher, 1995).

Figure 1 also shows that alienation is assumed to develop in part from negative school-related experiences, and especially from the perception that there have been negative classroom practices and peer interactions in class, and a lack of school attachment,

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