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The role of family and peer relations in adolescent antisocial behaviour: comparison of four ethnic groups

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Abstract

The dominant theories about the development of antisocial behaviour during adolescence are based almost entirely on research conducted with mainstream, white, middle-class adolescents. The present study addresses this significant gap in the literature by examining whether the same model of family and peer influence on antisocial behaviour is applicable to adolescents belonging to different ethnic groups. The sample included 603 adolescents (318 females and 285 males) from four ethnic groups: 68% of adolescents were Dutch, 11% were Moroccan, 13% were Turkish and 8% were Surinamese. The questionnaires assessing antisocial behaviour, quality of parent–adolescent relationship and involvement with deviant peers were completed by adolescents individually at schools. Results show few ethnic differences in the mean level of the assessed constructs: adolescents from different ethnic groups show similar levels of antisocial behaviour, are to a similar degree satisfied with their relationships with parents, disclose as much information to them, and do not differ in their involvement with deviant peers. However, the associations of parent and peer relations with antisocial behaviour differed across the ethnic groups.

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Introduction

In research on developmental psychopathology, and in clinical work, the child's family is frequently considered the most important factor in the development of antisocial behaviour. Empirical studies have identified a wide range of family factors, including low socioeconomic status, living in a single parent family, marital discord, etc., as consistent covariates of such problems during adolescence (see for reviews Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995; Lahey, Waldman, & McBurnett, 1999). Among these factors, it appears from recent studies that the quality of the parent–adolescent relationship, a factor that is most proximal to adolescent's everyday experience, bears an especially strong association to antisocial behaviour (Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000; Bird et al., 2001; Deković, Janssens, & van As, 2003).

The quality of the parent–adolescent relationship is a broad construct that refers to an emotional climate or “atmosphere” in the relationship between the parent and the adolescent. As such, the quality of the relationship is seen as a fundamental aspect of the relationship and as the context in which interactions between the parent and adolescent take place (see also Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Dishion et al., 1995). Research findings indicate that a negative relationship quality (i.e. a high level of conflict and a low level of emotional bonding) between adolescents and parents is related to higher levels of externalizing problem behaviour (Deković, 1999). Similarly, Snyder and Huntley (1990) report that the relationship between antisocial adolescents and their parents appears to be characterized by a lack of intimacy, a lack of mutuality, and more blaming, anger, and defensiveness than in normal families. When the parent–adolescent relationship is characterized by negativity, adolescents are probably less likely to internalize parental values and norms. Because parents provide support for conventional behaviour and sanctions against conduct problems, a positive relationship with parents may function as a protection against antisocial behaviour and delinquency.

Moreover, adolescents who have a positive relationship with their parents are more likely to communicate with their parents, to tell them about their daily activities, and to disclose to them their thoughts and feelings. Recent findings (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) have shown that adolescent disclosure was the strongest predictor of parental knowledge about their adolescent's whereabouts, and parental knowledge has been consistently linked to a low level of antisocial behaviour (for a review see Dishion & McMahon, 1998; for empirical examples see Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Jacobson & Crockett, 2000). Therefore, adolescent openness and communicativeness towards their parents seem to be closely related to involvement in antisocial behaviour. Indeed, poor communication with parents appeared to be an important predictor of adolescent delinquency (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987), whereas higher levels of adolescent disclosure were found to correspond to lower levels of norm breaking (Stattin & Kerr, 2000) and delinquency (Kerr & Stattin, 2000).

The determinants of problem behaviour are not limited to the family. As children approach adolescence, they spend increasing amounts of time with their peers without adult supervision (Mounts & Steinberg, 1995) and peers become the most important reference group for adolescents (Hartup, 1999). An aspect of peer relations that has emerged as the most prominent predictor of several kinds of problem behaviour is the association with deviant peers. Research findings showed that adolescents who are involved with deviant peers exhibit more norm-breaking behaviour (Brendgen, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 2000), more substance use (Aseltine, 1995), more

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