



## SOCIOMORAL REASONING, PERCEPTIONS OF OWN PARENTING AND SELF-REPORTED DELINQUENCY

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**Summary**—This study considers the relationship between moral reasoning, perceptions of parenting and self-reported delinquency in a sample of undergraduate students. Correlations showed that several aspects of perceived parenting style were related to moral reasoning, and perceived parental rejection was related to delinquency. Separate analysis for males and females showed the same pattern. Gender of respondent was the most significant predictor of self-report delinquency scores. For males and females considered apart, perceived parental over-protection was related to male self-reported delinquency, and moral reasoning to female self-reported delinquency. The extension of this study to offender groups is seen as the next step in this line of investigation. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

### INTRODUCTION

It is firmly established that family functioning plays an important role in the social adjustment of young people, particularly with regard to juvenile delinquency (Patterson, 1986). For both young children and adolescents there are three critical aspects of parental behaviour: appropriate discipline; clear supervision; and warmth and nurturance in parent-child interactions. Patterns of erratic, lax and strict discipline tend to characterise the parenting styles of antisocial children and juvenile delinquents (Rankin & Wells, 1990). Patterson (1986) describes the contrast between enmeshed and lax discipline. An enmeshed disciplinary style, with continual parental reprimands, gives rise to a coercive, aggressive style of interaction between the child and parent. Lax discipline, with low levels of control, is likely to result in the child's failure to develop internalised constraints on their behaviour. Following social control theories, the child does not develop secure attachments to the parents and is less motivated to conform to their parent's wishes (Hirschi, 1969).

Poor supervision, that is, a lack of awareness of the child's actions and whereabouts and a failure to set boundaries for acceptable behaviour, has been found in a number of delinquent samples, in both working and middle classes (Farrington & West, 1990; Riley & Shaw, 1985; Wilson, 1987). As well as referring to close physical proximity to the younger child, this also encompasses indirect supervision, so maintaining some influence over the behaviour of older children.

Warmth and nurturance in familial interaction are crucial in forming attachments between the parents and children, and is an important setting condition for parental reinforcement of their child's prosocial behaviour. In samples of high school boys and girls, Rankin and Wells (1990) and Rankin and Kern (1994) found that having close ties to parents was moderately and inversely related to self-report delinquency. Mak (1994) also found that low levels of self-reported delinquency were related to adolescents' perceptions of their parents as warm and understanding.

While the family-delinquency relationship is well documented, there are unanswered questions including whether there may be differing roles for fathers and mothers in the development of specific behavioural patterns. The evidence suggests that strong attachments to both parents is associated with a lower probability of delinquency than having just one strong attachment, but that the sex of the parent is not important (Rankin & Kern, 1994).

One way of attempting to understand the way in which parenting style influences the child's behaviour is by considering its relationship with the mediating factor of the child's cognitive processes. Indeed, several studies have suggested that the effect of early experience on later adjustment is mediated by social information processing (Hart, Ladd & Burleson, 1990; Strassberg,

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Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 1994; Weiss, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 1992). Thus, there is evidence to suggest that distinct patterns of social information processing and cognitive distortions are associated with antisocial and delinquent behaviour in both young children (Dodge & Frame, 1982) and adolescents (Slaby & Guerra, 1988). Such findings, particularly with quite young children (Dodge, 1980), suggests that early experience, in which parents and family figure large, plays a key role in later socialisation.

While studies with younger children using observational methods for measuring parenting styles have been informative, a cognitive element of potential importance concerns the individual's own *perception* of their parenting. Krohn, Stern, Thornberry and Jang (1992) found that adolescent perceptions of family processes, including supervision and discipline, were only weakly related to parental perceptions of the same family processes. The perceptions of both parents and adolescents were predictive of the adolescents' self-reported delinquency, but parental perception was a better predictor of official records of delinquency. Hatzichristou and Papadatos (1993), with a sample of Greek juvenile delinquents, used the delinquents' perceptions of parental behaviour to study the relationship between offending and (perceived) childhood abuse and neglect. Thus, after childhood it may be that perceptions of one's experience of parenting, rather than current parenting (if any), are associated with antisocial behaviour.

Sociomoral reasoning is another area of social cognition related to antisocial behaviour. The general position is that lower levels of sociomoral reasoning, typically Kohlberg's (1976) Immature Stages (1 and 2), is related to delinquency (Blasi, 1980; Nelson, Smith & Dodd, 1990). This relationship may, in turn, be mediated by the relationship between poor moral reasoning on social information processing. Gibbs (1993) suggests that low or immature levels of moral reasoning are maintained by cognitive distortions such as non-veridical attitudes about goals, motivations and behaviour, thus inhibiting sociomoral development, and acting as a defence against cognitive dissonance.

The development of sociomoral reasoning is an obvious area of parental influence, although this possibility has been relatively neglected in favour of investigating the influence of schools and peers. Speicher (1994) took data from Kohlberg's original longitudinal study and the Oakland Growth Study (Jones, 1939; cited in Speicher, 1994), to study familial patterns of moral reasoning. Speicher concluded that parents' moral reasoning appeared to be related to adolescent's moral reasoning, with a stronger association for females than for males. However, the critical factor in development to the highest moral levels, for both males and females, was college graduation. These results must be regarded with some caution as family make-up and life, and parental roles have changed considerably since the time when these data were collected.

Walker and Taylor (1991) considered the effect of specific styles of parent-child interaction on moral development. They looked at the style of family interaction and development of moral reasoning in children aged from 6 to 16 years. Several different clusters of parenting behaviour were identified, where a discussion style involving representational and supportive interactions was associated with the greatest moral development.

In seeking to draw together for the first time some of the unexplored strands in this field, the current study considers the relationships between perceptions of parental rearing, sociomoral reasoning and self-reported delinquency. As the first in a planned series of studies, this study used an undergraduate population to test the sensitivity of the procedures.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

A total of 64 undergraduate volunteers, 42 females and 22 males, aged between 18 and 25 years (mean = 19.53 y, S.D. = 1.06) took part in the study. Socioeconomic status was ascertained by asking about their father's and mother's occupations and education, using the Standard Occupational Classification (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1991). As expected, the majority of the respondents were of high socioeconomic status, mainly being of professional and managerial classes.

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