



Family influences on self-reported delinquency among high school students

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We investigated the links between perceived family relationships, parental discipline style, locus of control, self-esteem and self-reported delinquency among 177 Australian teenagers. The prediction that locus of control and self-esteem would mediate the effects of family process on delinquency was tested using structural equation modelling. Although there appeared to be a good fit between the data and the proposed model, the amount of variance explained by the predictor variables was not large. Among females, the best predictor of low levels of self-reported delinquency was an inductive discipline style, whilst for males high levels of self-reported delinquency were best predicted by a punitive discipline style. Among males, positive family relations was a significant predictor of high self-esteem. No mediating effects of self-esteem and locus of control were observed. The findings are discussed with reference to previous research, and some implications for clinical practice are also noted.

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Introduction

To what extent do family characteristics and personality factors shape self-reported delinquent behaviours among teenagers? It is now well documented that family functioning affects the emotional adjustment of its members. For example, individual pathology among family members (manifested as neurotic symptoms, low self-esteem, and dissatisfaction with life circumstances) has been found to be significantly related to the level of interpersonal pathology displayed by the family (manifested as intermember conflict, low solidarity, and member dissatisfaction) (Scott and Scott, 1987). Moreover, negative evaluations of family relations by parents and offspring have been shown to be related to adverse judgements of each other.

Several family process factors have been identified as being important in shaping adolescents' emotional health. These include parenting styles, family communication, parental pathology, separation or divorce, family conflict and adolescent perceptions of the family, to name a few (Heaven, 1994a). In the present research, however, attention will be paid to the influence of family relations and parental discipline style on self-reported delinquency. An assessment will also be made of the extent to which these relationships are mediated by the personality factors locus of control and self-esteem.

Family factors and delinquency

The influence of the family on adolescent behaviour can perhaps best be understood in

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terms of social cognitive theory (e.g. Muuss, 1988; King *et al.*, 1995). This approach emphasises the importance of observational learning, modelling and imitation in human development. Thus, teenagers learn different behaviours by identifying with salient others such as parents and peers.

Recently, one research team investigated the relationship between adolescent and parental perceptions of how family members interact with and feel about one another and official and self-reported delinquency (Krohn *et al.*, 1992). It was found that both parental and adolescent family process measures made independent and significant contributions to the explanation of delinquent behaviour.

Yet other researchers suggest that groups of delinquents perceive their families to be considerably less cohesive, less expressive, and to have lower levels of independence among members than do members of control groups. Delinquents also perceive their families as having higher levels of control and to participate in fewer social and recreational activities compared to other families (Bischof *et al.*, 1995). Similarly, negative communication by parents has been found to be significantly related to self-reported interpersonal violence in males (Heaven, 1994b), whilst delinquent boys are less likely to receive praise from their mother and father than non-delinquents (Cortes and Gatti, 1972).

In addition to general family functioning, the present study will also pay specific attention to the role of parental discipline style in predicting self-reported delinquency. Many researchers have shown that parents' discipline style is associated with adolescent delinquency and aggression (e.g. Loeber and Dishion, 1983; Snyder and Patterson, 1987; Patterson *et al.*, 1989; Shaw and Scott, 1991; Farrington, 1992).

A longitudinal study by Lefkowitz *et al.* (1978) showed that self-ratings of aggression were significantly correlated with parental use of corporal and other punishment. More recently, Shaw and Scott (1991) found that a perceived punitive and love-withdrawal discipline style were positively associated with self-reported delinquency, while induction was found to be negatively associated with self-reported delinquency among Australian teenagers.

Hypothesis 1. Negative perceptions of family relationships will be directly related to high self-reported delinquency scores.

Hypothesis 2. A punitive parent discipline style and love-withdrawal will be related to higher levels of self-reported delinquency, while an inductive discipline style will be related to low self-reported delinquency.

The mediating role of personality

There is empirical evidence to suggest that personality factors may mediate the effects of family experiences on delinquency. Shaw and Scott (1991) observed that adolescents' locus of control mediated the relationship between parent discipline style and self-reported delinquency. In other words, punitive parenting and parental love-withdrawal were significantly associated with increased reports of delinquency, these effects being mediated by an external locus of control. On the other hand, self-reported delinquent activity decreased when inductive parenting had been experienced, with the effect being mediated by an internal locus of control.

It is also important to note that links have been demonstrated between parent discipline style and self-esteem on the one hand, and self-esteem and delinquency on the other.

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