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Perceptions of the family, delinquency, and emotional adjustment among youth

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Abstract

This study explored the relationships between perceived family processes (parental bonding and parental discipline styles) and adolescent emotional and behavioural adjustment among a sample of youth. Respondents were 92 (53 female, 39 male) high school students, aged 13–17 years. Significant sex differences were noted regarding levels of self-reported delinquency and parental induction style. After controlling for sex, perceptions of low care and love withdrawal were significantly related to delinquency, while low care, overprotectiveness and love withdrawal were found to be related to poor well being. Structural equation modelling was used to further assess the relationships between perceptions of family life and the outcome variables. It was concluded that adolescent perceptions of family processes form a coherent and integrated network with implications for behavioural and emotional adjustment. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Delinquency; Emotional well being; Parental bonding; Parental discipline styles

1. Introduction

Given the challenges posed by the adolescent years (Barnes, 1995), it is hardly surprising that teenagers have been earmarked as a group at risk for problem behaviour and emotional distress (Hendry, Shucksmith, Love, & Glendinning, 1993). Family environment is acknowledged to be of critical importance when considering the behavioural and emotional

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well-being of adolescents (see also Bahr, 1991; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Noller & Callan, 1991). The present research investigates the extent to which adolescents' perceptions of parental bonding and parental discipline styles are related to their levels of self-reported delinquency and general emotional adjustment.

2. Family life and psychological adjustment

The family, as the primary source of socialisation, has been consistently implicated in the emotional adjustment of adolescents. What appears most influential in shaping adolescent outcomes is family process (e.g. conflict, cohesiveness, etc.) rather than family structure (Borrine, Handal, Brown, & Searight, 1991). For instance, longitudinal research by Newcomer and Udry (1987) showed that family disruption rather than family structure was instrumental in altering adolescents' transitions to sexual intercourse. In addition, high self-esteem and a general sentiment of satisfaction with life have been shown to be related to family health (Baumrind, 1991), effective familial communication (Adams & Gullotta, 1983; Barnes & Olson, 1985), family cohesion (Bell & Bell, 1982) and familial stability (Noller & Callan, 1991). Likewise, elevated levels of psychological distress have consistently been found to be associated with evidence of conflictual and enmeshed families (Biggam & Power, 1998; Burt, Cohen, & Bjork, 1988; Mohr, Preisig, Fenton, & Ferrero, 1999; Noller & Callan, 1991; Slater & Haber, 1984).

2.1. Parental bond

The parental bond (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) has been shown to be of particular relevance in the understanding, prediction and possible prevention of various adolescent problems. Parker and colleagues identified *care* (suggesting care/involvement vs indifference/rejection), and *overprotection* (suggesting control/overprotection vs encouragement of independence) as the most salient dimensions of parenting. Adolescents who display strong attachment to their parents are less likely to participate in delinquent acts than their less intimately attached counterparts (Le Blanc, 1992).

The families of violent offenders and sexual offenders have consistently shown high levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect, suggesting that these families are characterised by low bonding (Blaske, Borduin, Henggeler, & Mann, 1989). Mak (1994) surveyed over 700 Australian high school students in Years 8–12 (mean age = 15.6 yr). As predicted, it was found that higher delinquency scores were significantly associated with low parental care and parental overprotectiveness for males and females. Those from affectionless control families displayed significantly higher levels of delinquency than did those from optimally bonded families.

Emotional neglect and overprotection have also been linked to personality disorders (Frank, Zweig, & Paris, 1991). An investigation using the Parent Bonding Instrument illustrated that adolescents who perceived their parents as exerting affectionless control were twice as vulnerable to the experience of suicidal thoughts than adolescents who reported a warmer bond with their parents (Martin & Waite, 1994). Likewise, Shams and Williams (1995) found that overprotection was significantly associated with psychological distress among British non-

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