



Poor school bonding and delinquency over time: Bidirectional effects and sex differences

Jenny Freidenfelt Liljeberg^{a,b,*}, Jenny M. Eklund^a, Marie Väfors Fritz^{a,1}, Britt af Klinteberg^{a,b,c}

^a Centre for Health Equity Studies, CHESS, Stockholm University/Karolinska Institutet, Sveavägen 160, Sveaplän, S-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

^b Department of Woman and Child Health, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Karolinska Institutet, Karolinska Universitetssjukhuset, Solna, S-171 76 Stockholm, Sweden

^c Department of Psychology, Stockholm University, S-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

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The association between poor school bonding and delinquency has only been partly addressed in earlier research. Using a longitudinal design, the objective of our study was to investigate possible bidirectional effects and sex differences between adolescents' experienced school bonding and self-rated delinquency over time. A total of 788 adolescents (353 boys and 435 girls) were investigated by questionnaire at age 14 and 16. Poor school attachment and commitment as well as poor teacher attachment were found to be stronger determinants of delinquency for males than for females. Delinquency predicted poor school commitment for both boys and girls, and poor school attachment for girls, thus indicating bidirectional effects over time and sex differences in some of the bidirectional effects. The study concludes that the delinquency propensity of adolescent boys may be affected by all school bonding dimensions, whereas for girls it is their relationship with their teachers that is of significance.

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School is an important place for children and adolescents since it is here they spend a large proportion of their time. When young people reach pre- and early adolescence the influence of family and parenting seems to decrease and the environment, especially school becomes increasingly important in the socialisation process and the development of prosocial behaviours (e.g. Thornberry, 1987). Researchers generally agree that school itself and children's attachment to teachers affect not only academic achievement, but also moral, behavioural and social development (e.g. Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001). Thus, adolescents who develop a positive social bond with their school are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour and achieve well academically than those who fail to establish a social bond.

It has accordingly been proposed that a positive attitude to school may be protective against developing adjustment problems such as delinquency. Thus, school may protect children from embarking on and maintaining norm-breaking and delinquent behaviours. It has been hypothesised similarly that adolescents who have poor bonds with their school are at risk of developing delinquent behaviour. Indeed, previous findings support the notion that there is a relationship between poor school bonding and delinquency (e.g. Eklund & af Klinteberg, 2006; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999). For example, it has been shown that adolescents reporting poor school bonding display more problem behaviours such as delinquency (Le, Monfared, & Stockdale, 2005; Payne, 2008; Simons-Morton et al., 1999). It has also been

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 (0)8 163662; fax: +46 (0)8 16 26 00.

E-mail address: jenny.freidenfelt.liljeberg@chess.su.se (J. Freidenfelt Liljeberg).

¹ Present address: Department of Health and Society, Malmö University, S-205 06 Malmö, Sweden.

shown that delinquent boys are less ambitious, do not achieve as well, and are not as well-adjusted at school as non-delinquent boys (Eklund & af Klinteberg, 2006).

Even though these studies support an association between school bonding and delinquency, their cross-sectional design makes it difficult to rule out the possibility that it may be delinquent behaviour that leads to poorer school bonding. Thus, the direction in this relationship is not always clear (Bryant, Schulenberg, Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnston, 2000; Maddox & Prinz, 2003) and the question as to whether poor school bonding predicts delinquency, delinquency leads to poor school bonding, or whether there are bidirectional effects over time, remains.

The construct 'school bonding' includes a number of dimensions such as school attachment, teacher attachment, school commitment, school involvement and ambition. The number and content of these dimensions differ from one study to another depending on which theory and previous research the study is based on. However, most studies of school bonding include school attachment, school commitment and teacher attachment. School attachment refers to a sense of belonging and feeling comfortable in the school, i.e., feelings and caring about the school, not the personnel. School commitment concerns the students' personal investment in the schoolwork, including future achievements and striving for good grades. Teacher attachment, in turn, refers to the students' experience of interpersonal connections to the teachers, i.e., feeling supported and understood by the personnel (e.g. Maddox & Prinz, 2003). It was these three aspects of school bonding that we were especially interested in for the present study.

A good and positive school attachment is thought to protect against delinquency. Female delinquency, for instance, has been found to vary with the strength of the social bond (measured by attachment to school and commitment to education): thus, the risk of becoming delinquent decreases as the level of social bonding increases (Torstensson, 1990). In other words, adolescents with well-established social and in particular school bonds are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and delinquency (Simons-Morton et al., 1999). However, another longitudinal study found that poor school commitment did not predict delinquency (Longshore, Chang, & Messina, 2005), while a cross-sectionally designed study demonstrated that school attachment and school commitment are significant predictors of delinquency, although only for boys. Teacher attachment was found not to be a significant predictor of delinquency for boys or girls (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992). In another cross-sectionally designed study it was found that school attachment, school commitment and teacher attachment are all predictive of male deviant involvement. The authors interpret the results as implying a link between strong bonding and low levels of delinquency. Poor teacher attachment is predictive of deviant involvement, whereas findings for school attachment and school commitment do not predict delinquency for females. However, results suggested that poor school attachment and commitment are stronger determinants of delinquency for males than females (Rosenbaum & Lasley, 1990). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that because of the cross-sectional design of this study, the results could also be interpreted as implying that delinquency causes poorer school bonding or as reciprocal effects.

In sum, studies which focus on separate aspects of school bonding in relation to delinquency thus provide somewhat conflicting results. Whereas some studies indicate that school attachment and school commitment predict delinquency for boys but not for girls (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Rosenbaum & Lasley, 1990), another study found that female delinquency varies with the strength of attachment to school and commitment to education (Torstensson, 1990). However, the opposite, namely that poor school commitment does not predict delinquency has also been found (Longshore et al., 2005). Furthermore, teacher attachment is reported to predict delinquency for both boys and girls in one study (Rosenbaum & Lasley, 1990), while these associations are not found for girls or boys in a study by Cernkovich and Giordano (1992).

Most studies of the association between dimensions of school bonding and delinquency have only looked at how school bonding affects delinquency and not vice versa. Furthermore, it seems that no longitudinal studies have been conducted in which boys and girls were analysed separately, thus sex differences have not been tested. It is, therefore, possible that poor school bonding precedes delinquency for one sex but not the other, which could explain some of the conflicting results for the association between poor school bonding and delinquency. To shed further light on this relationship we included the dimension 'teacher defiance' in the present study, since students' own problems in terms of hostility towards teachers could affect their relationship with their teachers. The present study, therefore, provides new insights because of its longitudinal design, which made it possible to test the direction of effects, and the fact that it included both boys and girls which made it possible to test differences between the sexes. Thus, the aim of the present study was to investigate the direction of connections between delinquency and the most frequently addressed aspects of school bonding, using prospective longitudinal data. We were, therefore, interested in looking at the three dimensions of school bonding, i.e., school attachment, school commitment and teacher attachment, and their individual relation with delinquency, rather than school bonding's relation to delinquency as a whole. A further aim was to test for sex differences. Our hypothesis was that there might be bidirectional associations between experiences of these dimensions of school bonding and delinquency, and that the direction of these associations could differ for boys and for girls.

Methods

Participants

The sample comprised adolescent girls and boys participating in a short-term longitudinal project that began during the fall of 1998 and continued over 18 months. The adolescents were 14 years old at the first data collection and 16 years old at the second. All 8th grade students in a medium-sized town in central Sweden were invited to participate in the project. The target

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