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# Parental attitude toward deviance as a predictor of delinquency: Making the connection via perception and cognition

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## ABSTRACT

This study tested a core postulate of social cognitive theory: i.e., that perception precedes cognition in the development of behavior. Using data from four of the first five waves of the 1725-member (918 males, 807 females) National Youth Survey (NYS), youth perception of parental attitude toward deviance and youth attitude toward deviance at Waves 2 and 3 were tested as possible mediators of the relationship between Wave 1 parental attitude toward deviance and self-reported delinquency at Wave 5. The target chain was both significant and significantly stronger than the reverse chain and there was no evidence that age, race, or sex moderated this mediated relationship. These results support the presence of a chaining process in which proximal social, perceptual, and cognitive events link to distal behavioral outcomes like delinquency.

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It is a well-known fact that strong parental beliefs about the dangers and inappropriateness of drug use and delinquency correlate negatively with offspring delinquent behavior (Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1991). In a survey of 20,239 junior and senior high school students, Mrug and McCay (2013) determined that perceptions of peer and parental disapproval of alcohol use were accompanied by lower levels of self-reported drinking. They also found that peer and parental disapproval of alcohol use were more effective in discouraging drinking behavior in older as opposed to younger students, white as opposed to black youth, and girls as opposed to boys. In an earlier study, Unnever, Cullen, and Agnew (2006) showed that bad parenting, to include parental reinforcement of offspring aggressive behavior, appeared to have an indirect effect on aggression and delinquency by way of the child's own aggressive attitude. Unlike the Mrug and McCay (2013) study, however, the results did not vary across race or gender. Parental attitudes toward deviance correlated significantly with college students' attitudes toward deviance and involvement in delinquency in both the U. S. and Japan (Kobayashi, Akers, & Sharp, 2011). The results of these three studies indicate that parental attitudes toward deviance may encourage offspring deviant behavior but they disagree as to whether the effect is moderated by basic demographic variables like age, race, and sex. In addition, it is impossible to draw any causal inferences from these studies because all three utilized a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal design and relied on youth reports of parental disapproval and parenting attitude rather than on reports directly from the parents.

Whereas a number of longitudinal studies on parenting and delinquency have been conducted, very few have explored attitudes toward deviance in both parents and children. In one recent longitudinal investigation, delinquent-oriented

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attitudes in 324 rural youth were found to mediate the relationship between inconsistent parenting and early adolescent antisocial behavior (Halgunseth, Perkins, Lippold, & Nix, 2013). On the basis of these results the authors speculate that inconsistent parenting facilitated development of antisocial attitudes in affected youth and that these antisocial attitudes, in turn, encouraged future delinquency. Actual parental attitudes, however, were not evaluated in the Halgunseth et al. (2013) study; accordingly, the relationship between parental and youth attitudes toward deviance could not be assessed. One study that did examine parental attitudes toward deviance found that lenient parental attitudes toward underage drinking were directly linked to future alcohol-related problems in the offspring of these parents (Mares, van der Vorst, Engles, & Lichtwarck-Aschoff, 2011). Where Halgunseth et al. (2013) covered youth attitudes toward deviance but not parental attitudes toward deviance, Mares et al. (2011) covered parental attitudes toward deviance but not youth attitudes toward deviance. Research that includes both parental and youth attitudes toward deviance is consequently required.

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive model, a fundamental element of Akers' (1998) social learning theory of crime, offers a means of investigating parental and youth attitudes toward deviance simultaneously. One of the core principles of social cognitive theory is that relationships between social and behavioral variables are mediated by cognitive and perceptual factors and that a stimulus or environmental event must be perceived before it can be coded into memory as cognition (Bandura, 2001). Using this theory as a conceptual framework, it is argued that youths' perception of their parents' attitudes toward deviance in conjunction with their own attitudes toward deviance will mediate the relationship between parenting and subsequent delinquency. Simons, Simons, Chen, Brody, and Lin (2007), for instance, discovered that cognitive/emotional factors mediated a number of associations between parenting practices and delinquency. In their study, the effects of parental monitoring/discipline and parental hostility/rejection on conduct problems and deviant peer associations were fully mediated by low self-control, hostile perceptions of relationships, and acceptance of deviant norms on the part of the children of these parents. What this means is that the effect of parenting on subsequent offspring behavior may be indirect, running through such cognitive-perceptual mediators as deviant attitudes, hostile attributions, and outcome expectancies for antisocial behavior.

It has been speculated that parenting factors may have a differential impact on delinquency development depending on whether boys or girls are the focus of attention (Chesney-Lind & Faith, 2001). Accordingly, it may be important to account for the potential moderating effect of sex on any relationships observed between parental and youth attitudes toward deviance and subsequent offending behavior. Hoeve et al. (2009) failed to observe a moderating effect for offspring sex in their meta-analysis of parenting and delinquency but they did note that parental support and delinquency were more strongly correlated in same sex pairs (fathers-sons, mothers-daughters) than in opposite sex pairs (fathers-daughters, mothers-sons). Studies conducted since the Hoeve et al. (2009) meta-analysis have produced mixed results. Boisvert, Vaske, Taylor, and Wright (2012), for instance, determined that parents' tendency to attach better to their daughters than to their sons and to be more rejecting of their sons than of their daughters led to sex-linked differences in self-control, which, in turn, contributed to greater offending in boys than in girls. In a direct test of the moderated mediation hypothesis, Walters (2013) found that parental involvement mediated the relationship between delinquent behavior at age 16 and criminal offending at age 24 in female but not male offspring. By contrast, Fagan, Van Horn, Hawkins, and Jaki (2013) failed to uncover a moderating effect for sex in their study on the relationship between parenting style and offspring substance misuse. Mrug and McCay (2013) note that age, sex, and race all potentially moderate the relationship between parental attitudes toward deviance and offspring deviant behavior.

The present study was designed to test a hypothesis central to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986); namely, that social variables are interpreted (perceptual process) prior to being internalized (cognitive process) and that these two processes influence subsequent behavior. Longitudinal data from four of the first five waves of the National Youth Survey (NYS) were used to test this hypothesis. Four waves of data were used for the main analyses: parental attitude toward deviance at Wave 1, perceived parental attitude toward deviance and youth attitude toward deviance at Wave 2, perceived parental attitude toward deviance and youth attitude toward deviance at Wave 3, and self-reported delinquency at Wave 5. It was predicted that a perceptual variable—youth's perception of parental attitude toward deviance—and a cognitive variable—youth attitude toward deviance—would mediate the relationship between a social variable—parental attitude toward deviance—and a behavioral variable—self-reported delinquency—and that of the two mediating variables, perception would precede cognition. Several control variables were included in the analyses; specifically, age, race, sex, and prior delinquency. Interactions between three potential moderating variables (age, sex, and race) and actual parental attitude toward deviance, perceived parental attitude toward deviance, and youth attitude toward deviance were also included in the analyses.

## Method

### Participants

The current study was a secondary data analysis of Waves 1, 2, 3, and 5 of the nationally-representative National Youth Survey (NYS; Elliott, 1976–1980). All 1725 (918 males, 807 females) members of the NYS served as participants in this study. During Wave 1 of the NYS participants were 11–17 years of age ( $M = 13.87$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) and fell into the following ethnic categories: 78.9% white, 15.1% black, 4.4% Hispanic, 1.0% Asian, 0.5% American Indian, and 0.2% other.

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