



Parental attachment and Chinese adolescents' delinquency: The mediating role of moral disengagement



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ABSTRACT

There is substantial literature documenting the negative association between secure parental attachment and lower adolescent delinquency, but little is known about the mediating mechanisms (i.e., how does parental attachment relate to delinquency?) underlying this relation. The present study examined whether secure parental attachment would be indirectly related to lower adolescent delinquency through lower adolescent moral disengagement. A total of 1766 adolescents (44% male; mean age = 14.25 years, $SD = 1.54$) living in an urban area of southern China completed anonymous questionnaires regarding parental attachment, moral disengagement and delinquency. After controlling for gender, age, socioeconomic status, and school variable, it was found that secure parental attachment was negatively associated with adolescent delinquency and this negative association was fully mediated by the extent of adolescent moral disengagement. These findings contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development of adolescent delinquency and have important implications for intervention.

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Introduction

During the past several decades, increases in adolescent delinquency and its detrimental effects on adolescents' adjustment and public safety have received substantial attention from criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists (Agnew, 2008; Howell, 2003). Involvement in delinquent behavior leads to many negative consequences, such as poor academic performance, disturbances in social relationships, and even serious, violent, and chronic offenses (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Thus, it is essential to understand contextual and psychological antecedents in order to identify targeted interventions for adolescent delinquency.

The role of parental attachment in adolescent delinquency

From an ecological perspective, the family has an enduring effect on the development of delinquent behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). There is considerable evidence indicating that various aspects of family dysfunction play important roles in the emergence of adolescent delinquency (Hoeve et al., 2009; Hoeve et al., 2012). Among these factors, parental attachment is considered to be particularly important (Bowlby, 1973; Hirschi, 1969). Parental attachment refers to an

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affectional bond between parents and children (Bowlby, 1988). Two theories from the criminological and psychological literature explain the relation between parental attachment and delinquency. Hirschi's (1969) social control theory asserts that adolescents with strong positive affectional bonds to parents are more likely to care about the normative expectations of their parents, which keep them from delinquent behaviors. Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory assumes that children form "internal working models of relationships" based on their attachment experiences with attachment figures (e.g., parents, peers). Children who are in an insecure attachment relationship form maladaptive internal working models of others (e.g., people are untrustworthy or hostile), that lead them to show little affection or concern for others and engage in high levels of problem behaviors to fight against this hostile environment (Bowlby, 1973). There is considerable evidence suggesting that the quality of parental attachment is a powerful predictor of adolescents' delinquency (Allen et al., 2002; Higgins, Jennings, & Mahoney, 2010). For instance, Allen et al. (2002) found that insecure attachment to parents predicted increasing delinquency during mid-adolescence. In another longitudinal study, Higgins et al. (2010) also found that lower or decreasing levels of secure parental attachment throughout adolescence were associated with higher levels of delinquent behaviors. In addition, a meta-analysis indicated that the overall mean effect size for the association between insecure parental attachment and delinquency was significant, with $r = .18$ (Hoeve et al., 2012).

Although previous studies have examined the effect of parental attachment on adolescent delinquency, most of them have been conducted in western countries such as the United States. Arnett (2008) pointed that the U. S. represents less than 5% of the world's population, but over 98% of developmental research is based on children in that country. Thus, we were interested in examining whether the reported association between secure parental attachment and adolescent delinquency could be generalized to other countries such as China. Given that attachment is generally seen as a universal aspect of the human experience (Bowlby, 1979), it likely will have a similar role in parent-adolescent relationships across different countries and cultures. Cai (2010) proposed that the theory of "internal working models of relationships" likely functions similarly for youth in Chinese culture as it does for youth in Western cultures. Thus, we hypothesized that the protective effect of secure parental attachment on delinquency would also be found among Chinese adolescents. However, so far few studies in China have tested the role of secure parental attachment in adolescent delinquency (Liu, 2011; Yang, Cai, & He, 2010). In fact, the features of Chinese culture offer an intriguing research setting for exploring this issue. Since 1980, the Chinese government has implemented the one-child policy and most families only have one child. Parents are inclined to invest a great deal of care and attention in their only child, resulting in forming more interactions and close ties between parents and children (Feng, Poston Jr., & Wang, 2014). Therefore, the parent-child relationship continues to be dominant in adolescents' interpersonal life and plays a very important role in the adjustment of Chinese adolescents. Based on the above theoretical analyses and empirical evidence, we used a relatively large sample of Chinese adolescents to examine the association between secure parental attachment and delinquency.

The mediating role of moral disengagement

Although the direct link between parental attachment and adolescent delinquency was demonstrated in previous research, there is little known about the mediating mechanisms through which parental attachment is associated with adolescent delinquency. Recently, there has been interest in gaining a better understanding of the mediating variables that may be involved in this relation (e.g., Troxel, Trentacosta, Forbes, & Campbell, 2013; de Vries, Hoeve, Stams, & Asscher, in press). Determining the roles of mediators in the relationship between parental attachment and delinquency would be important to advance our understanding of delinquency and provide guidance for interventions to reduce it (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van Ijzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010). In the present study, we aimed to test a conceptual model in which parental attachment would be indirectly related to Chinese adolescent delinquency through moral disengagement (see Fig. 1).

The concept of moral disengagement is grounded in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caparara, & Pastorelli, 1996) and refers to the "individual's tendency to use mechanisms conducive to a selective disengagement of moral censure" (Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008, p. 1288). According to social cognitive theory, people always have personal standards of moral behavior that deter them from misbehavior, and misbehavior that is in contrast with personal standards will result in self-censure and guilt (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). However, the above process can be deactivated selectively through moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). Individuals with morally disengaged attitudes find ways of justifying immoral behaviors and feel freed from the self-sanctions and guilt induced by their immoral behaviors. Therefore, moral disengagement is considered to be a risk factor for the emergence and development of delinquent behaviors (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011). The cross-cultural generalizability of social cognitive theory has been demonstrated in terms of its explanatory power and predictive power (Bandura, 2002). Children with morally disengaged attitudes show high engagement in misconduct regardless whether they come from individualistically oriented or collectivistically oriented cultures (Bandura et al., 1996, 2001; Shulman et al., 2011; Yang & Wang, 2012). For example, Bandura et al. (2001) found that moral disengagement contributed to U. S. adolescent delinquency over time; similarly, Shulman et al. (2011) found that a reduction in moral disengagement helped to speed decline in self-reported and official records of delinquent behaviors among adolescent male felony offenders in the U. S. In the empirical studies from China, moral disengagement has also been shown to be a critical mechanism underlying delinquent behaviors for adolescents: those adolescents with high levels of moral disengagement show more problem behaviors (Yang & Wang, 2011, 2012).

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