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## A matter of fact? Adolescents' assumptions about crime, laws, and authority and their domain-specific beliefs about punishment



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined adolescents' beliefs about the amount of punishment individuals should receive for violating different laws and whether these beliefs are connected with their informational assumptions (i.e., perceived facts) about crime, laws, and authority. American adolescents ( $N = 340$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 16.64$ , 58.2% female) reported their judgments concerning the appropriate punishment for violating laws regulating domain-specific behaviors and their informational assumptions regarding the prevalence and causes of crime, beliefs that authority is knowledgeable, and the purpose of punishment. Greater internal attributions for crime was associated with stronger punishment judgments for violating laws that regulate moral and conventional issues. Greater beliefs that punishment teaches right from wrong was associated with stronger punishment judgments for violating laws that regulate drug-related prudential issues, and lower punishment judgments for violating laws that regulate personal issues. Greater beliefs that authorities are more knowledgeable than others was associated with stronger punishment judgments for violating laws that regulate personal issues.

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by substantial gains in sociopolitical understanding and greater contact with social and legal organizations (Moffitt, 1993; Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). During adolescence, youth are forming more nuanced beliefs about the nature and role of social and political systems, including whether certain issues should be subject to social regulation and how authorities should respond if these laws are violated. Adolescents' concepts of law-breaking and punishment are pertinent components of their sociopolitical understanding (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017), because they have important implications for social and political attitudes and behavior. For instance, beliefs about punishment for law-breaking are foundational to attitudes concerning social policies and practices involving the criminal justice system, such as length of prison sentences, use of the death penalty, and readiness to criminalize socially disapproved behaviors (Duckitt, 2009). Adolescents' beliefs about punishment may also have implications for their involvement in delinquency, as youth who ascribe greater punishment for law violations are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors themselves (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017).

To date, the majority of research examining beliefs about punishment has utilized adult samples and has focused on support for the death penalty or longer prison sentences. Less is known about youths' ascriptions of punishment for violating laws that regulate different forms of crime and delinquency, or how these beliefs intersect with other facets of their emerging sociopolitical understanding. Social domain scholars propose that variation in social beliefs may be explained by differences in “informational assumptions,” which represent an individual's perceived fact-based understanding of social events and behaviors (Wainryb, 1991).

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However, researchers have not yet examined adolescents' fact-based understanding of crime, laws, and authority, or whether these assumptions are associated with their domain-specific beliefs about punishment. Using a social domain framework, this study examined the extent to which adolescents' informational assumptions concerning crime, laws, and authority were associated with ascriptions of punishment for violating laws that regulate different issues.

### 1. Beliefs about punishment: A social domain approach

Beliefs about law-breaking and punishment have generally been examined in the context of criminology, sociology, and political science. Developmental psychologists have recently highlighted that conceptualizations of laws, obedience, and punishment are important components of adolescents' social and civic understanding (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). During adolescence, youth are gaining increased abstract reasoning abilities while simultaneously engaging in higher levels of delinquency, which may lead to greater contact with legal systems and personal experiences with the consequences of law violations. The convergence of these two processes may lead youth to form beliefs about the appropriate punishment for violating different laws. From a social-cognitive developmental perspective, early experiences with law violations and emerging beliefs about punishment that are formed during adolescence as a result of these experiences may serve as the basis for punishment judgments later in life (Smetana, 2006).

Social domain theory is a potentially useful framework to examine adolescents' concepts of different types of laws and beliefs about the appropriate punishment for law violations. According to social domain theory, individuals judge and reason about social information from different domains of social knowledge (Turiel, 1983). The *moral* domain pertains to issues that concern the welfare of others, justice, and rights (e.g., fighting, cheating, stealing). Moral issues are obligatory, unalterable, and universally applicable (not contingent on social rules or authority). In contrast, *conventional* concepts are alterable, arbitrary, agreed-upon regulations that are dependent on authority and used to govern social interaction (e.g., obtaining a fishing license). The *personal* domain pertains to matters of personal preference and is not subject to moral or conventional authority. These issues are not a matter of right or wrong or subject to regulation, but are up to the individual (e.g., friendships choices). *Prudential* issues also concern personal matters, but in the context of prudence or self-harm (e.g., wearing a seatbelt).

Scholars have applied social domain theory to investigate adolescents' beliefs about laws and punishment (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). Specifically, this research has found domain consistency in youths' judgments and justifications about violations of laws regulating moral (e.g., fighting in public, vandalism, stealing), conventional (e.g., parking violations, obtaining fishing permits, registering ones car), and prudential (e.g., drug use) issues. Adolescents also viewed laws regulating personal issues, such as wearing baggy clothes in public, joining extracurricular activities, and getting a job, as illegitimate and violations of personal freedom. Similar domain-specific patterns have been demonstrated in adolescents' beliefs about the deserved punishment for violating different laws, with violations of laws regulating moral and prudential issues rated as deserving the most punishment, followed by violations of laws regulating conventional issues, and violations of laws regulating personal issues (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). These findings indicate that adolescents have a complex understanding of laws and punishment that aligns with distinct domains of social knowledge.

Although adolescents' beliefs about laws follow domain specific patterns, there is still considerable heterogeneity in youths' judgments about the appropriate punishment for violating different laws (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). Some of this variability may be accounted for by individual differences in youths' emerging social and political values systems. For instance, Oosterhoff, Shook, Clay, and Metzger (2017) found that youths' sociopolitical values concerning right-wing authoritarian and social dominance orientation were differentially associated with their beliefs about laws that regulate domain-specific behaviors. However, less research has examined the ways in which youths' views of punishment align with other facets of political understanding, including their factual assumptions about the nature and prevalence of crime, purpose of laws, and competence of authority.

### 2. Informational assumptions and beliefs about punishment

One potential source of variation in adolescents' punishment judgments concerns their informational assumptions about crime, laws, and authority. Informational assumptions pertain to perceived factual (either accurate or inaccurate) knowledge of the world (Wainryb, 1991). Unlike values or judgments, these factual assumptions are not evaluative, but rather represent an understanding about the characteristics of individual, social, or physical phenomena. Social domain theorists have used informational assumptions as a way of explaining heterogeneity in moral understanding and have typically focused on assumptions concerning multifaceted social phenomena, such as the point at which human life begins, the origins of sexual preferences, and the utility of corporal punishment (Smetana, 1981, 1982; Turiel, Hildebrandt, Wainryb, & Saltzstein, 1991). Variations in informational assumptions are thought to influence social and moral judgments by changing the meaning or interpretation of an event (Wainryb, 1991). For example, individuals who assume that life originates at conception may view abortion at any gestational age as morally wrong due to impediments on the rights and welfare of the fetus. In contrast, those who assume life originates later in pregnancy or at birth are more likely to judge and reason about abortion as a personal matter that should be up to the individual mother (Smetana, 1981). Similarly, adolescents may be forming informational assumptions about crime, laws, and authority that may be used to inform their beliefs about punishment.

Little research has examined adolescents' informational assumptions pertaining to crime, laws, and authority. However, research in criminology and political science, which emphasizes the instrumental and ideological basis of punitive attitudes, suggests that informational assumptions may be an important component of youths' judgments about punishment. For instance, the instrumental perspective of crime and punishment suggests that people endorse harsh punishment because they believe it will deter future crime (King & Maruna, 2009). Accordingly, people may be more inclined to endorse greater deserved punishment when they view that

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