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The validity of questionnaire self-report of psychopathology and parent–child relationship quality in juvenile delinquents with psychiatric disorders

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the validity of questionnaire self-report of psychopathology and parent–child relationship quality for juvenile delinquents with severe behavioural and psychiatric disorders by comparing information derived from questionnaire self-report with information from other sources, including parent report, in-depth interviewing, behavioural observation by clinicians, and official criminal records. The sample consisted of $N = 33$ juvenile delinquents with psychiatric disorders. The juvenile delinquents did not report increased levels of psychopathology or poor relationships with their parents, which is inconsistent with the fact that all juvenile delinquents were in day treatment for severe behavioural maladaptation and relationship problems. Moreover, parent ratings of psychopathology were consistently in the clinical range and relationship quality was evaluated as very poor by the parents ($d > .80$). We conclude that screening instruments for psychopathology and assessment of relationship quality relying on

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questionnaire self-report may not yield valid scores in this (extreme) population of juvenile delinquents.
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Introduction

Juvenile delinquents show considerably more psychopathology than adolescents from the general population (e.g. Doreleijers, 1995; Doreleijers, Moser, Thijs, van Engeland, & Beyaart, 2000). In Bulten's study (1998) young adult delinquents displayed five to eight times more psychiatric problems than peers from the general population. Vreugdenhil, Van den Brink, Ferdinand, Wouters, and Doreleijers (2006) interviewed 204 incarcerated boys, aged 12–19 years, in six closed correctional facilities, using the DISC-C, which is an in-depth psychiatric interview based upon the DSM IV classification system. Ninety percent of the subjects were classified as having at least one psychiatric disorder, such as substance abuse, psychotic symptoms, ADHD or internalizing disorders. Notably, the high incidence of psychopathology was contradicted by relatively low scores on the externalizing scale of the Youth Self-Report, which raises the question as to whether the assessment of psychopathology by means of self-report is appropriate for high risk clinical samples, such as juvenile delinquents with psychiatric disorders. Vreugdenhil et al.'s findings are in line with other studies showing that self-report produces unrealistically low scores of psychopathology in adolescents with life course persistent antisocial behaviour (Barkley, 1998; Loeber, Green, Lahey, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1989).

Additional evidence for under-reporting of psychopathology in clinical samples stems from epidemiological studies revealing that the frequency and severity of problems reported by parents and children vary by the clinical status of the child. In non-clinical samples, self-reporting by young people shows higher rates of psychopathology compared to parent report of psychopathology of their children (Achenbach, 1991a, b; Stanger & Lewis, 1993; Verhulst, van der Ende, & Koot, 1996, 1997), whereas in clinical samples youth ratings tend to be lower than parent ratings (Kazdin, French, & Unis, 1983; Kolko & Kazdin, 1993; Mokros, Poznanski, Grossman, & Freeman, 1987; Thurber & Osborn, 1993; Thurber & Snow, 1990).

Explanations for under-reporting psychopathology by adolescents in clinical samples may be found in unrealistic self-perception, biased attribution processes and lack of self-reflection (Dodge, 1993; Kazdin, 1993; Moffitt, 1990). Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) found that juvenile delinquents show high narcissism and inflated self-esteem. For example, the assessment of juvenile delinquents' self-esteem with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Measure yielded unrealistically high ratings on self-esteem. Gibbs (2003) emphasizes that denial and trivializing emotions are frequently used defence mechanisms in juvenile delinquents to protect themselves from being offended.

More valuable information on psychopathology in juvenile delinquents may be obtained by using parent report in addition to youth self-report. Information from parents is also important when investigating parent–child relationship quality. In a prospective national population study Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, and Wong (2001) found that delinquency and violent behavior were

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