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Self-esteem as a predictive factor in juvenile delinquency

Abstract

Volumes of research have been written over the past forty years on factors related to delinquency. Theories on the causation of delinquency have been derived from three basic perspectives: biological, psychological, and environmental-sociological (Johnson, Bird, & Little, 1981; Empey, 1982). Biological causes include genetic and physical structure of the child. The psychological perspectives sees delinquency as a result of emotional instability. Environmental reasons include socio-economic status of the child's family, peer group pressure, and neighborhood cultural characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to review the relationship of self-esteem and delinquency and primarily focus on whether a low level of self-esteem is a predictive factor for delinquency. As a result there will be some theoretical overlap in this review.

SELF-ESTEEM AS A PREDICTIVE FACTOR
IN JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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David D. Carlson
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Volumes of research have been written over the past forty years on factors related to delinquency. Theories on the causation of delinquency have been derived from three basic perspectives: biological, psychological, and environmental-sociological (Johnson, Bird, & Little, 1981; Empey, 1982). Biological causes include genetic and physical structure of the child. The psychological perspectives sees delinquency as a result of emotional instability. Environmental reasons include socio-economic status of the child's family, peer group pressure, and neighborhood cultural characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to review the relationship of self-esteem and delinquency and primarily focus on whether a low level of self-esteem is a predictive factor for delinquency. As a result there will be some theoretical overlap in this review.

This paper will first review literature that sees self-esteem as a significant factor in delinquency. There will also be a discussion on research indicating that the relationship is not necessarily singular in direction. Delinquency may enhance self-esteem in some situations. Finally, the relationship will be discussed from a treatment and correctional point of view.

The complexity of the issue begins with defining delinquency (Doerner, 1987). Delinquency is a legal term

that includes behaviors exhibited by a juvenile that would constitute a public offense if exhibited by an adult. Examples are burglary , theft, assault, etc. Behaviors such as truancy and running away from home are not delinquent acts, but could still bring a child under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court as a child in need of special services. In the past, delinquency had a broad definition which included public offenses as well as truancy and running away. Irregardless, even the narrow definition encompasses a wide range of schildren and behaiovrs. The relationship of self-esteem to so many behaiovrs and children makes it difficult to develop easy solutions or forumulas (Block & Flynn, 1986.)

Self-esteem as a Significant Factor in Delinquency

It is assumed by professionals in many fields that delinquency is somehow related to self-esteem (Rosenburg & Rosenburg, 1978). In a nationwide survey of 2,213 tenth grade boys from 87 high schools it was concluded that self-esteem was a more powerful causal factor on delinquency than delinquency was on self-esteem. Boys with low self-esteem were more likely to have higher levels of delinquency. And, boys with high levels of self-esteem were more likely to develop low self-esteem after committing a delinquent act.

Other factors related to delinquency include I.Q. level, reading level, family history of conflict, and impulsivity (Burchard & Burchard, 1987).

The sociological point of view emphasizes the significance of self-esteem on delinquency (Wadsworth, 1979). The middle class child has a better chance to enhance his self-esteem with his parents, in school, and with his friends. The lower class child does not have that opportunity which creates problems in coping with his environment. Unsuccessful coping mechanisms contribute to low self-esteem and the situation is then perpetuated.

The importance of belonging to a social group and its effect on self-esteem and delinquency was noted in a study of non-delinquents and delinquents (LeFlore, 1988). In a comparison of the youths' perceptions of their families, non-delinquents perceived their families as positive, moral, religious, achievement oriented, and active recreationally. Delinquent families were seen as less cohesive and less expressive. It was suggested that delinquents' families may not satisfy self-esteem needs of the children resulting in difficulty in coping. The delinquents, therefore, seek assistance from their peer group which may require performing

in a delinquent fashion. Children with little moral teaching are vulnerable to this situation.

A promising program for reducing the likelihood of delinquent behaviors also illustrate the significance of self-esteem (Johnson, Bird, & Little, 1981). The most effective ways to diagnose pre-delinquents is impressionistic assessments from parents, teachers, and others who have regular contact with the children. It was recommended that programs should minimize stereotyping, improve the image of law enforcement, broaden the ties between the community and the youth, mainstream instruction on parenting, reduce youth's perception of powerlessness, and reduce the flow of negative information from schools to home and from the juvenile justice system to the schools. Several of these recommendations relate specifically to the child's perception of himself and in his perception of society.

Further, self-esteem is seen as having a stronger relationship with delinquency than socio-economic status of the child (Reckless, Dinitz & Kay, 1957; Weis & Hawkins, 1982). Irregardless of socio-economic status or environment, a positive self-image may divert a child from delinquent behaviors.

The significance of self-esteem in delinquency is also a reasonable conclusion when considering circumstances surrounding child abuse (Dutile, 1982), and may have the strongest argument for low self-esteem as a predictor of delinquency. Children at risk for delinquency exhibit the same characteristics as children at risk for abuse. Child maltreatment is a common precondition to delinquency irregardless of socio-economic factors (Paperny & Deisher, 1983). Preventative methods include very early intervention with parents who have been previous perpetrators or victims of abuse in an attempt to break the cycle.

Enhancement of Self-esteem Levels by Delinquency

It is likely that self-esteem and delinquency are related and in some cases low levels of self-esteem precede and contribute to subsequent delinquent acts (Rosenburg & Rosenburg, 1978; Weis & Hawkins, 1982). However, there is also substantial evidence to support the relationship may be more complex.

In a study at a hospital setting (Offer, Marohn, & Ostrov, 1979) 55 delinquents were categorized into four groups. Only two categories scored low on self-esteem. Children seen as impulsive and anti-social, even though delinquent, were not suffering from low self-esteem.

Belonging to a group, irregardless of social acceptability of their behavior, may enhance self-esteem (LeFlore, 1988). Delinquents who could not satisfy self-esteem needs within their families often sought acceptance from a socially unacceptable delinquent peer group. They had positive self perceptions for being part of that group.

Similarly, delinquents were viewed as satisfying self-esteem needs that were going unmet in acceptable behavior settings (Weis & Hawkins, 1982), irregardless of socio-economic status. In order to obtain acceptable behavior, children must be appropriately socialized. Recommendations to reduce delinquency included increasing educational success chances, making school curriculum relevant to occupations, the youth should view themselves as an integral part of the school, reintegrate failures to the school, and have close cooperation with families.

These recommendations agree with the concepts of Bonding Theory. Bonding to a society is necessary to adhere to norms and satisfy self-esteem needs. The children must be socially attached and committed in an acceptable way or the children will seek acceptance in a less than desired environment (Hirschi, 1969).

Self-esteem enhancement resulting from delinquent behavior arguably can be seen in gang behavior (Virgil, 1988). If an adolescent cannot get his self-esteem needs met at home with his family, in school, or in sports, it is plausible that membership in a delinquent gang is sought. Delinquent behavior may be performed to achieve acceptance. Ultimately self-esteem is enhanced, but in a socially unacceptable manner.

Further support for this position comes from self-reports, official data, and other studies (Hildelang, 1973). Children least likely to report having violated the law are those who feel loved, identify with their parents, and respect their parents. If these conditions are not prevalent, the child seeks attachment to a group that will love him and enhance his self-esteem.

Treatment and Correctional Perspective

Another perspective on the issue of self-esteem and delinquency comes from the rehabilitation vs. punishment perspective of corrections. If self-esteem is a factor certainly treatment of maladjusted delinquents should shed some light on this relationship.

Rehabilitation should be viewed as an attempt to up-lift the offender (Empey, 1982). Punishment degrades people. If society and the courts are interested in rehabilitation, attempts should be made to enhance self-esteem of the offender. Specifically, education and socialization should be the focus of self-esteem programs.

Eldefonso and Hartinger (1976) are in agreement with positive rehabilitation as little benefit is seen from incarcerating. Certainly the offender is removed from the street, but incarceration encourages the offender to pursue further crime, develops feels of being an outcast, and the incarcerated offender is less likely to adapt unacceptable morals.

Black (1989) indicates self-esteem is an important variable for delinquent children whose parents are chemical dependent. Chemically dependent parents have not been able to meet the self-esteem needs of their children. The children need to feel valued and a part of their family in order to feel important. Children from dysfunctional families generally experience inconsistencies and unpredictable behavior resulting in feelings of insecurity and a lack of self-esteem. The first topic to address in treatment is self-love.

Summary

This paper has attempted to review literature and journals which pertained to the relationship between delinquency and self-esteem and specifically to discover if self-esteem levels could be used to predict delinquent behaviors. Even though delinquents have been studied for the past few decades with some intensity, evidence does not exist which would allow a professional to state that low levels of self-esteem are preconditions to all delinquencies. However, some evidence has shown self-esteem as being significant (Rosenburg & Rosenburg, 1978; LeFlore, 1988). Studies from the sociological perspective (Wadsworth, 1979; Johnson, Bird, & Little, 1981) agree and emphasize the role of self-esteem in delinquency. And, the Bonding Theory (Hirschi, 1969) would support the significance of self-esteem but would disagree that low self-esteem leads to delinquency. Hirschi explains delinquency as behavior satisfying bonding needs of a person. If the person cannot bond to a nondelinquent social group, the person will show behaviors which will bond him to a delinquent group.

Writings from the treatment and correctional perspective also emphasize improving self-esteem, but come short of saying that low levels of self-esteem will lead to

delinquency (Empey, 1982; Eldefonso & Hartinger, 1976). Some agreement exists that incarceration is degrading and further alienates a person from society, which works in the opposite direction intended through corrections and rehabilitation. In fact, some research (Offer, Marohn, & Ostrov, 1979) implies that delinquent behavior may enhance self-esteem in those people who have been unable to have their self-esteem needs met in an acceptable fashion for our society. The research and writings reviewed has simply raised more questions about a rather complex set of issues, but do indicate a relationship between the level of self-esteem and potential delinquent behavior.

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