
Original Article

Family power structure and identity styles in delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents: a comparative study in Tehran

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Abstract

Background: The present study was conducted to investigate the Family Power Structure (FPS) and identity style in delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles in Tehran.

Methods: To accomplish the goal of the study, 80 adolescent delinquents of the Correction and Rehabilitation Centers, aged between 15 and 18, were selected following cluster sampling procedure as well as 80 students of secondary school, aged between 15 and 18, in Tehran in 2014. To obtain data, FPS and Identity Style Inventory (ISI-6G) instruments were used. Data was analyzed between these two groups using independent t test, and Chi square test.

Results: The findings indicated that there is a significant difference between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles in FPS and its subscales ($P<0.001$) and identity style ($P<0.001$). Moreover, the informational identity style was related to lower levels of delinquency. In addition, a diffuse-evident identity style was found to be related to the delinquency.

Conclusion: These findings emphasize that an inappropriate decision-making process pattern in a family has a significant effect on deviant behavior and identity style in adolescents. So, family counselors must pay attention to FPS in the therapeutic interventions (prevention and treatment) for adolescent delinquency.

Keywords: Parenting; Family; Juvenile Delinquency; Adolescent

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Introduction

Adolescence denotes a time in which youth begins to experience dangerous behaviors like substance use and delinquency (1). Delinquent adolescents commonly show behaviors that are prohibited by law, such as drug use, vandalism, larceny, burglary, and violence (2). Delinquent behaviors such as vandalism and theft are also common in the high school years (1). Previous studies indicate that during adolescence, delinquent behaviors increase dramatically (3), with an estimate of 15% of adolescents participating in these behaviors at the age of 11 and about 50% at 17 (4). There is considerable evidence to declare that family plays an important role in the development of adolescent delinquent behavior (5). A Family Systems theory on power allows us to consider how dynamic powers within one relationship may influence other relationships or individuals within the family (6). On the other hand, the family systems perspective emphasizes the essential elements like family bonding (i.e., affective ties) and family organization (i.e. adaptability and control) in the development of delinquency (7). Tenets from one particular family systems perspective and Structural Family Therapy seem to possess particular utility as a construction to organize our perception of the systemic antecedents of the issue of violence among children (8). In the family systems theory (Minuchin, 1985), cohesion and power are recognized as two fundamental dimensions of family relationships (9). Both cohesion and power are related to child outcomes such as aggression and self-assertive behaviors (10). The power structure is one holistic feature of family systems and relates to a subsystem that describes the manner in which members interact (11). In addition, family power structures are reflected in parental disciplinary styles (12). From a structural perspective, a dysfunctional

family system has problem with hierarchical structure, boundary or alignment elements of its structure have impaired its resources for coping with and adjusting properly to contextual stressors (13). In accordance with this perspective, family issues are indicated in the areas of power distribution, boundaries, developmental appropriateness, identified parenthood, and conflict resolution. The concept of boundaries refers to the rules that define who participates in which subsystems (14). Minuchin (1974) contended that optimal family structure throughout late adolescence is typified by obvious interpersonal boundaries and a reliable marital alliance in which parents maintain hierarchical power over children and prevent developing cross-generational alliance (15). The existence of undifferentiated, excessively included relationships, unresolved marital conflict, and hierarchical misalignments between parents and the child impose unnecessary pressure on the young adult and hinder the separation-individuation process. Disengaged boundaries create a danger since parents are less involved and the adolescent is overly autonomous, leading to disruption of the adolescent's feeling of belonging. Enmeshed boundaries are characterized by parental over-involvement. The movement of thought and feeling between parents and the child is indeed so intrusive that the adolescent's sense of feeling separated is smothered. Healthy boundaries, in contrast, include a free exchange of equally nurturance and opinion (16). The parental power is correlated with decreased levels of behavior problems, such as violence (17). The families of violent adolescents have high rates of abuse, neglect, adverse behavior, and parental deviance and low rates of positive communication (16). In other words, identifying family contextual factors that decrease, maintain, or aggravate delinquent behaviors among adolescents has

long been encouraged and may be useful for reducing the risk of delinquent behaviors among adolescents exhibiting higher levels of school disengagement, as well (18). Nevertheless, individual adolescent characteristics also have an important role in delinquent behavior (16), although identity development is an important predictor of risk behavior (19). Identity formation is one of the major developmental challenges that adolescents and young adults must negotiate (20). To effectively regulate and govern their lives, individuals need to develop a steady and meaningful identity structure, which enables them to maintain a sense of self-cohesion over time and space and which provides a frame of reference for making decisions, problem-solving, and showing experience and self-relevant information (21).

Identity style refers to reported preferences in the social-cognitive solutions used to deal with or to avoid the tasks of constructing and maintaining a sense of identity. Three identity styles have been identified: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant (22). Adolescents utilizing an informational orientation are self-reflective and actively seek out and evaluate self-relevant information. Those with a normative attitude more automatically adopt prescriptions, values from significant others, and conform to these others' expectations. Young people with a diffuse-avoidant approach procrastinate and delay dealing with identity issues for as long as possible (23). It is important to note that families have the potentials to be an important stabilizing influence in the development of adolescent identities. The family structure provides an important environment in which identity development occurs (24). As mentioned above, family and individual adolescent characteristics are also important factors in the development and reduction of antisocial behaviors and delinquency. The

current research was carried out to comparatively study the impact of FPS and identity style between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles in Tehran.

Methods

Participants and Plan

The present study was carried out in 2014 in Tehran as a causal-comparative study. The sample contained two groups: 80 adolescents aged between 15 and 18 in Tehran Juvenile Correction and Rehabilitation Centers and a non-delinquency group: 80 adolescents aged between 15 and 18 in high schools. The delinquency group was selected by targeting sampling in Tehran Juvenile Correction and Rehabilitation Centers. The adolescents of the non-delinquency group were selected following random cluster sampling method from the secondary schools of Tehran by group matching including age and socioeconomic status. Also, the parents of the two groups were matched for their level of education and employment. The inclusion criteria for the two groups of participants were as follows:

- Age ranged between 15 and 18 years
- The basic reading and writing ability
- Without any severe mental disorders, like psychotic and neurotic disorders and physical illnesses
- Living with both birth parents

The exclusion criteria for the two groups of participants were age range lower than 15 or over 18 years, illiteracy or lack of ability to write or read addiction or having severe mental disorders and physical disabilities, and divorced families or single parent families.

Measurements

Socio-demographic data sheet

Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which included questions covering their age, education, birth order of the participants, and personal information of the parents of the juvenile including age, education, and job.

Family Power Structure

The Family Power Structure Inventory (FPSI), developed by Saidian, was originally prepared in Persian in 2002 (25). This inventory is a 63-item self-report instrument. The FPSI contains three subscales: family power domain couple, power structure family, and the method of enforcement of couple power. The maximum and minimum scores in the subscale of the FPS are 230 and 46, so that higher scores reflect greater power structure in the family. Participants respond to items on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true for me) to 5 (very true for me). In the original study, internal consistency reliabilities were as follows: family power domain couple=0.83, family power structure=0.85, and the method of enforcement of couple power in the family=0.73.

Identity style measures

Identity processing styles were measured by the Identity Style Inventory (ISI-6G: (26) on a 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me) Likert scale. The students rated the extent to which they considered the 40 statements to be self-descriptive. The ISI contains three continuous style scales: (1) the informational-style scale (11 items: e.g., “I have spent a great deal of time thinking seriously about what I should do with my life.”): coefficient alpha was= 0.59, (2) The diffuse avoidant-style scale (10 items: e.g., “I am not really thinking about my future now; it is still a long way off.”): coefficient alpha= .78, (3). The normative-style scale (nine items: e.g., “I prefer to deal with situations where I can rely on social norms and standards.”): coefficient alpha= .64. The identity commitment scale (10 items:

e.g., “Regarding religious beliefs, I know what I believe and do not believe.”): coefficient alpha= .81 in the present study. Internal consistency reliabilities for the Persian version of the scale are reported as well: 1. informational-style= 0.73, 2. normative-style= 0.66, 3. diffuse avoidant-style= 0.67, and 4. commitment= 0.73.

Procedure

Participants answered all the questionnaires independently under supervision of the interviewers and their parents filled out the informed consent. After obtaining parental as well as student consent, participants were asked to answer each question as honestly as possible.

All mothers of the two groups were asked to complete the FPSI and socio-demographic data. Students were asked to complete the Identity Styles Inventory. Then, the data collected was analyzed using SPSS version 17. Data was analyzed between these two groups running independent *t* test, and Chi square test and Levene's test.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 show the sample characteristics of the participants. As shown in Table 1, the highest category of age in the juvenile delinquency belonged to 16 (42.5%) and in non-delinquent group belonged to 15 (35%). In addition, most delinquent juveniles were the second child in the family (26.25%) and most of the non-delinquent juveniles were the first child (37.5%). The educational attainment of the juvenile delinquency ranged from elementary to high school among whom 52.5% had a secondary school certificate. The highest category of education level in the non-delinquent group belonged to the 9th grade (31.25%). As for the educational status of the parents of participants in the research the majority of fathers (33.75%) and mothers (42.5%) had secondary school and high school certificates, respectively. As

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristic of delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles in percent

Variable	Level of education	^a n _i	^a P	Age group (y)	n _i	P	Birth order	n _i	P
Juvenile Non Delinquency	9 th grade	25	31.25	15	28	35	1	30	37.5
	10 th grade	20	25	16	20	25	2	23	28.75
	11 th grade	20	25	17	20	25	3	18	22.5
	12 th grade	15	18.75	18	12	15	4-6	9	11.25
Juvenile Delinquency	Elementary school	27	33.75	15	22	27.5	1	16	20
	Secondary school	42	52.5	16	34	42.5	2	21	26.25
	High school	11	13.75	17	13	16.25	3	24	30
				18	11	13.75	4-6	19	23.75

^a Abbreviations: P; relative frequency; n_i: absolute frequency

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the parents (percentage)

Name of variable	Option	Non-Delinquent Adolescent Cf	ni	Delinquent Adolescent Cf	ni
Father's education	Illiterate	0	0	5	4
	Elementary school	13	16.25	17.5	14
	Secondary school	17	21.25	46.25	37
	High school	36	45	25	20
	University	14	17.5	6.25	5
Mother's education	Illiterate	0	0	7.5	6
	Elementary school	11	13.75	17.5	14
	Secondary school	15	18.75	22.5	18
	High school	35	43.75	41.25	33
	University	19	23.75	11.25	9
Father's job	Employee	46	57.5	47.5	38
	Self-employment	34	52.5	52.5	42
Mother's job	Employed	17	11.25	11.25	9
	Non employed	63	78.75	88.75	71

^a Abbreviations: P, relative frequency; n_i: absolute frequency

for parents' employment status, the majority of fathers (52.5%) and mothers (83.75%) were self-employed and housewives, respectively. Table 3 provides the means, standard deviations, Levene's test, and t test of all the variables used in the present study. The results of t test show that the mean of FPS and its subscales in the two groups had

significant differences. As reported in Table 4, the chi-square value was assessed, thus the null hypothesis was rejected ($P=0.001$, $X^2= 24.797$, $df=2$). In other words, a significant difference was observed between all identity styles in delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles.

Table 3. Mean, SD, and t-value of family power structure for delinquent juvenile (Group1, n=80) and non-delinquent juvenile (Group 2, n=80) groups

Variable	Group	Mean±SD	df	t	P
Family power structure	1	53.78±109.83	145.925	7.927	<0.001
	2	61.66±7.68			
Power domain couple within family	1	88.24±15.54	148.832	3.632	<0.001
	2	96.22±12.06			
Method of power couple implementation within family	1	20.05±6.85	5.256	5.256	<0.001
	2	27.61±5.09			
Family power structure's total	1	162.60±27.29	141.031	6.223	0.001
	2	185.74±19.01			

Table 4. Results of chi-square test in identity style variable

Group	Non delinquency				Delinquency			
	n _i	Cf	F _o	^a F _e	n _i	Cf	F _o	F _e
Informational identity style	46	57.5	46	33.0	20	25	20	33.0
Normative identity style	25	31.25	25	25.5	26	32.5	26	25.5
Diffuse/avoidant identity style	9	11.25	9	21.5	34	42.5	34	21.5
Total	80	100	80	80.0	80	100	80	80.0

Abbreviations: CF, cumulative frequency; n_i: absolute frequency, F_o: observed frequency, F_e: estimated frequency

Discussion

The present study was conducted to determine the differences in FPS and identity styles in delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles between 15 and 18. The results revealed that there are significant differences between FPS in delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles. The results of the current study are comparable to previous findings. Wentzel and Feldman (1996), for instance, compared the global ratings of family cohesion and FPS with adolescent outcomes and found that adolescents who rated their parents as egalitarian were most likely to report low levels of depression and high levels of social self-concept and self-restraint (27). Beavers, (1990) showed that the power structure of the delinquent juvenile family is anarchy because only one of their parents controls the whole power (28). This power of family structure leads to the unknown boundary of their family system (29). In a detailed review, the previous studies have shown that child behavior problems are related to a lack of parental support and control (30), an imbalanced parent-child relationship (31, 32), a lack of cohesion and structure in the family (33, 34, 35, 36), and a poor quality of communication between parents and children (14,37). Similarly, a previous study has concluded that the families of violent adolescents have high rates of abuse, neglect, aversive behavior, and parental deviance and low rates of positive communication (7). Other studies showed that adolescents originating from two-parent households are less inclined to engage in delinquent behaviors than those originating from one-parent families (38, 39). These findings suggest that family structure is a significant predictor of most self-reported delinquent behaviors. Based on the family systematic perception, family structure is related to breaking and entering, using cannabis, fighting, theft, vandalism, and

weapons possession (40). The results of the current study revealed that identity style has a significant difference between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles. In addition, it was shown that adolescents' utilizing a normative identity style (based on social convention and norms to regulate their behaviors) is nearly identical in both groups. Also, the informational identity style was observed to be associated to the lower levels of delinquency and a diffuse-evident identity style is related to the delinquency. The prior research indicated that using informational and normative styles was negatively linked to delinquency (41, 42). In other words, an information-oriented style associated to a more adaptive pattern of interpersonal behaviors (43, 44). In addition, endorsement of social norms and conventions with strong social ties are associated with less occurrence of delinquent behavior (41). Similarly, conscientiousness or inhibition, as reflected in careful, information-based planning, is associated with a lower occurrence of delinquent behaviors (45). However, a burgeoning body of literature indicates that individuals with a diffuse-avoidant style engage in self-serving problem behaviors and maladaptive patterns of interpersonal behaviors such as conduct disorders, delinquency, illegal drug use, and alcohol abuse (21, 43, 44, 46, 47, 48) and impulsiveness and low levels of self-control are associated with conduct problems and disorders (49). Philips and Pittman indicated that adolescents employing a diffuse-avoidant style differed effectively from those employing information or normative styles in terms of self-esteem, hopelessness, optimism/efficacy, and delinquent beliefs. Diffuse-avoidant participants were less optimistic, had lower self-confidence, expressed and experienced greater hopelessness, and had higher delinquent attitude scores compared with scores

obtained from participants using either a normative or an informational style (50). In the initial studies on family system dynamics and identity, formation in children that found that marital stability, clear boundaries, and the absence of intergenerational alliances in the family, could be facilitates identity development in adolescents. In addition, based on the results obtained from the current as well as the previous studies, family structure can be suggested to potentially represent a meaningful target of prevention and interventions among delinquent adolescents. One of the limitations of the present study is that just one family member (the child) provided the data using a self-report measure. This assessment can increase the possibility of bias in the results because adolescents filled up the questionnaires from their attitudes towards their parents. In addition, the use of retrospective data might have further altered the reliability of the family descriptions. Future studies are suggested to include more than one family member in the data collection procedure.

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