

Comparison of Family Power Structure and Identity Style Between Delinquent and Non-Delinquent Juveniles

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Abstract

Background: Adolescence denotes a time in which youth begins to experience dangerous behaviors like substance use and delinquency.

Objectives: In this study, we investigated the family power structure and identity style in delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles residing in Tehran, Iran.

Materials and Methods: To accomplish the goal of the study, 80 adolescent delinquents of the correction and rehabilitation centers aged between 15 and 18 years were selected with convenience sampling method and 80 students of secondary school age between 15 and 18 years in Tehran, Iran in 2012. They answered the instrument of family power structure (Saidian, 2004) and identity style (ISI-6G: White et al. 1998). The obtained data were analyzed using the independent t-test, chi-square test, and Levene's test.

Results: The findings indicated a significant difference between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles with regard to family power structure, its subscales ($P < 0.001$), and identity style ($P < 0.001$). Moreover, the informational identity style was associated with lower levels of delinquency. In addition, a diffuse-evident identity style was related to the delinquency.

Conclusions: These results emphasize that the inappropriate decision-making process pattern in a family has a significant effect on deviant behavior and identity style in adolescents. So, family power structure can be considered in therapeutic interventions (prevention and treatment) for adolescent delinquency.

Keywords: Delinquency, Family, Identity, Parenting

1. Background

Adolescence denotes a time in which youth begins to experience dangerous behaviors like substance use and delinquency (1). Delinquent behaviors are commonly defined as behaviors 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); for example, about 15% of adolescents participate in these behaviors at age 11 and about 50% of them at age 17 (4). There is also considerable evidence supporting that family plays an important role in the development of adolescent delinquent behaviors (5).

A "family systems" perspective on power allows us to consider how dynamic powers within one relationship may influence other relationships or individuals within the family (6). Besides, the family systems perspective emphasizes the importance of family bonding (i.e. affective ties) and family organization (i.e. adaptability, control) in the development of delinquency (7). Tenets

of one particular family systems perspective, structural family therapy (SFT), seem to possess particular utility as a construction to organize our perception of the systemic antecedents of the 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 arises when problems in one or more of the hierarchical, boundary, or alignment elements of its structure impair its resources for coping with and adapting effectively to contextual stressors (13). According to this perspective, family problems are diagnosed 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 subsystem (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 (14). The existence of undifferentiated, excessively included relationships, unresolved marital conflict, and hierarchical misalignments between parent and child, position unnecessary pressure on the young adult and hinders the separation-individuation process. Disengaged boundaries create danger as 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 thoughts and feelings between parent and child is indeed intrusive so that the adolescent's sense of feeling separate is smothered.

Healthy boundaries, in contrast, include a free exchange of equally nurturance and opinion (16). The parental power correlates with decreased levels of behavior problems, like violence (2). 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 decreasing risk of delinquent behaviors among adolescents exhibiting higher levels of school disengagement (1). Nevertheless, individual adolescent characteristics also have an important role in delinquent behavior (16), although, identity development is an important predictor of risk behavior (17).

Identity formation is one of the major developmental challenges that adolescents and young adults must negotiate with (18). To effectively regulate and govern their lives, individuals need to develop a stable and meaningful identity structure, which enables them to maintain a sense of self-continuity over time and space. Also, it provides a frame of reference for making decisions, problem-solving, and interpreting experience and self-relevant information (19). Identity style refers to reported preferences in the social-cognitive strategies used to engage or to avoid the tasks of constructing and maintaining a sense of identity.

Three identity styles have been identified so far: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant (20). Adolescents utilizing an informational orientation are self-reflective and actively seek out and evaluate self-relevant information. Those with a normative orientation more automatically adopt prescriptions, values from significant others, and conform to others' expectations. Young people with a diffuse-avoidant orientation procrastinate and delay dealing with identity issues for as long as possible (21). It is important to note that families have the potential to be an important stabilizing influence in the development of adolescent identities. The family structure provides an important en-

vironment in which identity development occurs (22). As mentioned above, family and individual adolescent characteristics are also important factors in the development and reduction of antisocial behaviors and delinquency.

2. Objectives

The current research examined the family and individual factors affecting adolescent delinquency. Based on what was mentioned, we aimed to compare family power structure and identity style between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles in Tehran, Iran.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants and Plan

This study was conducted in Tehran in 2012; it is a causal-comparative study. The sample contained two groups: 80 delinquency adolescents aged between 15 and 18 selected from Tehran juvenile correction and rehabilitation centers and a non-delinquency group of 80 adolescents aged between 15 and 18 selected from Tehran high school students. The delinquency group was selected by targeting sampling in Tehran juvenile correction and rehabilitation centers. The adolescents of the non-delinquency group were selected with cluster sampling method from 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 of the participants were as follows:

- Age range between 15 and 18 years,
- Ability to read and write,
- Without any severe mental disorders like, psychotic and neurotic disorders and physical illnesses,
- Living with both birth parents.

The exclusion criteria were as follow:

- Age lower than 15 or over 18 years,
- Illiteracy,
- Addicted or have severe mental disorders and physical disability,
- Having divorced families or single parent families.

3.2. Measurements

3.2.1. Sociodemographic Data Sheet

Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire that included questions about their age, education, birth order and personal information of their parents, including age, degree of education, and job.

3.2.2. Family Power Structure

The family power structure (FPS) inventory created by Saidian was originally prepared in Persian in 2002 (22). This inventory is a 63-item self-report measure. The family power structure 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 family power structure are 230 and 46, so that higher scores reflect greater power structure in the family. Participants respond to items on a 5-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 for family power domain couple as 0.83, family power structure as 0.85, and the method of enforcement of couple power in the family as 0.73.

3.2.3. Identity Style Measure

Identity processing styles were assessed with the identity style inventory (ISI-6G; White et al. 1998) (23). On a 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me) Likert-type scale, participants rate to which extent they considered 40 statements to be self-descriptive. The ISI contains 3 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.") with coefficient α as 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.") with coefficient α of 0.78, and 3) the normative style scale (9 items: e.g. "I prefer to deal with situations where I can rely on social norms and standards,") with coefficient α of 0.64. The identity commitment scale (10 items: e.g. "regarding religious beliefs, I know what I believe and do not believe") had a coefficient α of 0.81 in this study. Internal consistency reliabilities for the Persian version of the scale are reported as informational style, 0.73; normative style, 0.66; diffuse-avoidant style, 0.67; and the identity commitment, 0.73.

3.3. Procedure

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

All mothers were asked to complete the FPS questionnaire and sociodemographic data. Students were also asked to complete the ISI. Then, collected data were analyzed using independent t-test, chi-square test, and Levene's test by SPSS-17 software.

4. Results

Tables 1 and 2 show the characteristics of the participants in the study. As shown in Table 1, the highest category of age in juvenile delinquency group belonged to 16 (42.5%) years and in non-delinquent group belonged to 15 (35%) years. In addition, most delinquent juveniles were the second child in the family (26.25%) and the most nondelinquent juveniles were the first child in the family (37.5%). The educational attainment of the juvenile delinquency ranged from elementary to high school, among them 52.5% had a secondary school (education). The highest category of education level in the nondelinquent group belonged to the ninth grade (31.25%). Regarding parental educational attainment, the majority of

fathers (33.75%) and their mothers (42.5%) had the second school and the high school education, respectively. As for parental employment status, the majority of fathers (52.5%) and their mothers (83.75%) were self-employed and housewives, respectively.

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, Levene's test and t-test results of all variables. The results of Levene's test show that variance of family power structure and its subscales between 2 groups were unequal so that t-test was used. These results are displayed in Table 3. Table 3 shows that there is a significant difference between 2 groups of participants with regard to family power structure and its subclasses as well (family power structure's total: $t = 6.223, P = 0.001, df = 141.031$; family power domain couple: $t = 3.632, P = 0.000, df = 148.832$; family power structure: $t = 5.256, P = 0.000, df = 141.352$; and the method of power couple enforcement within the family: $t = 7.927, P = 0.000, df = 145.925$). Table 4 shows that the chi-square calculated value is greater than the chi-square critical value so the null hypothesis is rejected ($P = 0.001, X^2 = 24.797, df = 2$). In other words, there is a significant difference between identity styles in delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristic of Delinquent and Non-Delinquent Juvenile

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

Abbreviations: P, relative frequency; n_i, absolute frequency.

Table 2. Sociodemographic Characteristic of the Parents (Percentage)

Variables	Nondelinquent Adolescent, n _i (Cf)	Delinquent Adolescent, n _i (Cf)
Level of education of the father		
Illiterate	0	4 (5)
Elementary school	13 (16.25)	14 (17.5)
Secondary school	17 (21.25)	37 (46.25)
High school diploma	36 (45)	20 (25)
University degree	14 (17.5)	5 (6.25)
Level of education of the mother		
Illiterate	0	6 (7.5)
Elementary school	11 (13.75)	14 (17.5)
Secondary school	15 (18.75)	18 (22.5)
High school diploma	35 (43.75)	33 (41.25)
University degree	19 (23.75)	9 (11.25)
Father job status		
Employee	46 (57.5)	38 (47.5)
Self-employment	34 (52.5)	42 (52.5)
Mother job status		
Employed	17 (11.25)	9 (11.25)
Non employed	63 (78.75)	71 (88.75)

Abbreviations: P, relative frequency; n_i, absolute frequency.

Table 3. Mean, Standard Deviation and T Value of Family Power Structure for Delinquent Juvenile (Group 1, n = 80) and Non-Delinquent Juvenile (Group 2, n = 80) Groups

Variable	Mean ± SD	Levene's Test		t test		
		Sig.	t	df	P Value ^a	t
Family power structure		.001	10.442	145.925	.000	7.927
Group 1	53.78 ± 109.83					
Group 2	61.66 ± 7.68					
Power domain couple within family		.008	7.187	148.832	.000	3.632
Group 1	88.24 ± 15.54					
Group 2	96.22 ± 12.06					
Method of power couple implementation within family		.007	7.536	5.256	.000	5.256
Group 1	20.05 ± 6.85					
Group 2	27.61 ± 5.09					
Family power structure's total		.001	12.792	141.031	.001	6.223
Group 1	162.60 ± 27.29					
Group 2	185.74 ± 19.01					

Abbreviations: SD, standard deviation; df, degree of freedom; t, student's t-test.

^aP < 0.001.

Table 4. Results of Chi-Square Test in Identity Style Variable

Group Variable	Non-Delinquency			Delinquency		
	n _i (Cf)	F _o	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.

5. Discussion

This study was conducted to determine differences with regard to family power structure and identity styles between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles of 15 and 18 years old. Results revealed that there are significant differences between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles with regard to the family power structure. The results of the current study are comparable to previous findings which have been done in this field. For example, Wentzel and Feldman (24) compared the global ratings of family cohesion and family power structure to adolescent behaviors 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. Beavers (25) showed that the power structure of the delinquent juvenile family is anarchy because only one of their parents controls the whole power (26). This power of family structure leads to the unknown boundary of their family system (27). In a detailed review, the previous study shows that child behavior problems are related to lack of parental support and control (28), an imbalanced parent-child relationship (29, 30), lack of cohesion and structure in the family (31-34), and poor quality of communication between parents and children (14, 35). Similarly, the 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). Further study showed that adolescents originating from two-parent households are less inclined to engage in delinquent behavior than those originating from one-parent families (36, 37).

These findings suggest that family structure is a significant predictor of most self-reported delinquent behaviors. Based on family systematic perception, family structure was related to breaking and entering, cannabis use, fighting, theft, vandalism, and weapons possession (38). The results of the current study reveal that identity style has a significant difference between delinquent and non-delinquent juveniles. It also showed that adolescents who utilize a normative identity style (relying on social convention and norms to regulate their behaviors) are nearly identical in both groups. Also the informational identity style associates with lower levels of delinquency and a diffuse-evident identity style relates to the delinquency. The prior research indicated that use of the informational and normative styles was negatively linked to delinquency (39, 40). In other words, an information-oriented style relates to a more adaptive pattern of interpersonal behaviors (41, 42). In addition, endorsement of social norms and conventions with strong social ties are associated with less delinquent behavior (39). Similarly, conscientiousness or constraint as reflected in careful, information-based planning is associated with a lower occurrence of delinquent behaviors (43). 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 (19, 41, 42, 44-46), while impulsiveness and low levels of self-control are associated with conduct problems and disorders (47). Philips and Pittman indicated that adolescents employing a diffuse-avoidant style differed significantly from those employing information or normative styles in terms of self-esteem, hopelessness, optimism/efficacy, and delinquent attitudes. Diffuse-avoidant participants were less optimistic, had lower self-esteem, expressed greater hopelessness, and had higher delinquent attitude scores than participants using either a normative or an informational style (47).

Regarding the initial studies on system wide dynamics and identity formation indicating that marital stability, clear boundaries, and the absence of intergenerational alliances within the family, facilitate identity development in adolescents, also based on current and previous results studies, it seems that family structure potentially represents a meaningful target of prevention and interventions among delinquent adolescents. Limitations of this study were the data source (just one family member) and using a self-report measure which increased the possibility that the biased reports based on the explanation of one family member. In addition, the use of retrospective data might have further altered the reliability of the family descriptions. Future studies should include more than one family member.

Authors' Contributions

Anahita Khodabakhshi Koolaee conceived and designed the evaluation, interpreted the clinical data, and revised the draft of the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. Masoumeh Rahmatizadeh collected the clinical data and drafted the manuscript. Hossein Shaghelani collected the clinical data and performed the statistical analysis. Lesley Pocock revised the draft of the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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