

The Family Relations of Female Juvenile Delinquents

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This study evaluated the assumption that the family relations of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than those of male delinquents. In a 2 × 2 (gender by delinquency status) design, 32 intact families were matched on demographic variables, and the male and female delinquents were matched on arrest data. Mothers, fathers, and adolescents were administered a self-report personality inventory and were observed during a family interaction task. Consistent with the extant literature, families of delinquents had low rates of facilitative information exchange and delinquent adolescents were more dominant toward their mothers than were well-adjusted adolescents. It was also observed that fathers of delinquents were more dominant toward their wives than were fathers of well-adjusted adolescents. In regard to the primary purpose of the study, it was observed that mother-adolescent dyads and parents in families of female delinquents had higher rates of conflict than their counterparts in families of male delinquents. In addition, the fathers of female delinquents were more neurotic than the fathers of male delinquents. These findings provide some support for the view that the families of female delinquents are especially dysfunctional.

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Since the early 1960s, women have become increasingly involved in criminal activity (Adler, 1975; Nettler, 1978; Simon, 1975; Simons, Miller, & Aigner, 1980; Widom, 1978). Currently women account for 21% of all arrests for index offenses (e.g., murder, robbery, aggravated assault, and grand theft), with adolescent girls accounting for almost half of these arrests (U. S. Department of Justice, 1984). In light of the social and economic costs presented by female juvenile offenders, it seems important to examine the psychosocial context of their behavior. This is especially true when one considers the stability of antisocial behavior (Loeber, 1982) and the fact that the children of delinquent females will be at considerable risk for criminality (Rutter & Madge, 1976).

The purpose of this study is to examine the family relations of female juvenile offenders, and to test the assumption that the family interactions of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than those of male delinquents (Conger & Peterson, 1984; Felice & Offord, 1964; Gibbons, 1976; Widom, 1978). This assumption is based on the premise that owing to the existence of strong social sanctions against misbehavior among girls (Chesney-Lind, 1977; Gibbons, 1976; Nye, 1978; Smart, 1977; Toby, 1957), it must take an especially deviant family context to enable delinquency. In addition, because female adolescents are more invested in interpersonal relationships than male adolescents (Block, 1983; Cockburn & McClay, 1965), it seems possible that female delinquents may be more involved in family discord than their male counterparts.

Although the family relations of female delinquents have not been studied extensively, some investigators have supported the view that families of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than those of male delinquents. Roff and Wirt (1984) found that teachers' reports of disturbed family relationships strongly predicted future delinquent activity among girls. In other studies, female delinquents have reported greater parental conflict (Morris, 1964) and more family quarreling and marital dissatisfaction (Nye, 1958) than male delinquents reported. The finding that a higher percentage of the siblings of female delinquents have criminal records than the siblings of male delinquents (Ganzer & Sarason, 1973; Jones, Offord, & Abrams, 1980) also suggests that the families of female delinquents are more dysfunctional.

In contrast with the results of the preceding studies, the only study that used an observational method to assess family relations found relatively few differences between the families of male and female delinquents. Hetherington, Stouwie, and Ridberg (1971) compared the family interactions of male and female delinquents who were institutionalized with those of families of well-adjusted adolescents. The delinquents were evenly divided into three subtypes (i.e., unsocialized-psychopathic, neurotic-disturbed, socialized-

subcultural) on the basis of Quay's typology of delinquency (Quay, Peterson, & Consalvi, 1960). Observational measures, similar to those used in the present study, were derived from an audiorecorded unrevealed-differences family interaction task. A gender by delinquency interaction effect revealed that the female delinquents of the unsocialized-psychopathic and socialized-subcultural subtypes showed greater dominance toward their parents than did their male delinquent counterparts. However, no differences were observed between the families of male and female delinquents on the other observational measures.

In summary, there is some evidence that the family interactions of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than those of male delinquents, but the only study to use an observational method found few gender effects. The purpose of the present study, then, is to provide a well-controlled evaluation of whether the relations in families of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than those of male delinquents when observational methods are used.

METHOD

Subjects

The participants were 32 two-parent families who were divided into four equal-sized groups on the basis of adolescent delinquency status (delinquent vs. well adjusted) and gender of adolescent. These families were a subset of those who had participated in a larger project (Hanson, Henggeler, Haefele, & Rodick, 1984; Henggeler, Hanson, Borduin, Watson, & Brunk, 1985; Henggeler et al., 1986).

In the present study, female delinquents from intact families were identified and then matched with male delinquents from intact families and with well-adjusted adolescents from intact families on the basis of adolescent age, race, and family socioeconomic status. Male and female delinquents were also matched on the number of arrests and the severity of their most serious arrest. Parametric and nonparametric analyses showed that the groups did not differ on pertinent demographic variables. The adolescents ranged from 14 to 17 years of age, with a mean of 16 years; 62% of the families were black and 38% were white; and 72% of the families were of lower socioeconomic status. The delinquents averaged 3.4 arrests, and their most serious arrest scored 9.6 on a 17-point seriousness of crime scale (e.g., 1 = truancy, 4 = disorderly conduct, 8 = assault/battery, 13 = unarmed robbery 17 = murder; Kern & Bales, 1980).

Procedure

As described in earlier reports, the adolescent offenders and their families had been referred for social services by juvenile court through the Memphis-Metro Youth Diversion Project (Severy & Morton, 1982). For the delinquent families, their voluntary participation was a component of their contact with the treatment agency to which they had been referred. The well-adjusted adolescents and their families were recruited from the same neighborhoods as the delinquents and were recommended by local high school principals and teachers as well adjusted. In addition, neither these adolescents nor their siblings had prior arrest histories or psychiatric inpatient experience. The families of well adjusted adolescents were paid \$15 for their participation.

The families (mother, father, and adolescent) were interviewed in their homes by graduate and undergraduate research assistants. Family demographic information was obtained from the parents. Each member filled out the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1963) and the Unrevealed Differences Questionnaire (URD; Henggeler & Tavormina, 1980). The URD contains eight items, each with three to five alternative responses, and the respondent is required to rank-order his or her choices on each item. After individual family members completed the URD, the research assistant requested that the family jointly discuss and complete a blank URD. Members were encouraged to take their time and not to omit any questions. Family members gave their names before starting the task, and then the assistant left the room until the task was completed. Measures of family interaction were based on this audiotaped discussion. The dependent measures are intended to reflect psychosocial functioning at both individual and family levels.

Individual Measures

The EPI is a well-validated self-report instrument that included three scales. The extraversion scale measures socialization, the neuroticism scale taps general anxiety and discomfort, and the lie scale assesses the social desirability of the individual's responses (Furnham, 1984). These scales have proven useful in the evaluation of individual psychiatric disturbance (Comrey & Schiebel, 1985).

Family Measures

The observational measures were chosen to reflect important dimensions of family interaction that have been assessed by other researchers of family relations (Alexander, 1973; Farina, 1960; Hetherington et al., 1971;

Jacob, 1974; Mishler & Waxler, 1968). In order to define the main dimensions that these measures tapped, factor-analytic methods were used on the observational data of the 250 families who participated in the larger project. Three factors, accounting for approximately 75% of the variance, emerged from these analyses (Henggeler, Hanson, Borduin, & Haefele, 1985). The dimensions in the present study are based on these factors. The interrater reliabilities of the observational measures are satisfactory and are presented in previous reports (Hanson et al., 1984; Henggeler et al., 1986).

Facilitative Information Exchange. This dimension encompasses dyadic and individual communication processes that are supportive and that facilitate problem solving. Simultaneous speech and attempted interruptions were rated for each family dyad (i.e., mother-adolescent, father-adolescent, and mother-father). In addition, supportive statements and explicit information giving were scored for each family member.

Conflict/Hostility. This dimension reflects the degree of conflict, aggressiveness, and sarcasm expressed by one family member to another. Aggressive statements and a qualitative rating of conflict were scored for each dyad.

Dominance. This dimension reflects the relative degree of influence each dyad member has during the task. Relative talking time, speaks first/speaks last, and a qualitative rating of dominance were scored for each dyad.

RESULTS

The primary hypothesis of this study is that families of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than families of male delinquents. To confirm this hypothesis, we would expect to find a delinquency status by gender interaction effect, with post hoc comparisons showing that the families of female delinquents were the most disturbed. A secondary purpose of the study is to replicate previous findings that families of delinquents are more dysfunctional than families of well-adjusted adolescents. Such replication would be supported by the emergence of main effects for delinquency status.

Individual Measures

To minimize Type I error, a 2×2 (delinquency status by gender) MANOVA was performed on the EPI scores of each family member. A significant interaction effect was observed for fathers, $F(1, 24) = 5.60, p < .005$. Subsequent 2×2 univariate analyses revealed a significant effect for neuroticism, $F(1, 26) = 16.52, p < .001$. Tukey's post hoc test ($p <$

.05) showed that fathers of female delinquents were significantly more neurotic than fathers of male delinquents.

Family Measures

Data-reduction techniques were used to decrease the number of analyses required to test the hypotheses. Factor scores were calculated for each dimension of family interaction by first converting each dependent variable to a z score. Next, the z scores were weighted by coefficients from a factor analysis on the current data, and then summed to yield a total score for each dimension. A total of 12 ANOVAs were performed on the observational dimensions of facilitative information exchange, conflict/hostility, and dominance. The means and standard deviations for each dimension are presented in Table I.

Facilitative Information Exchange. Significant interaction effects were observed for mother-adolescent dyads, $F(1, 28) = 4.24, p < .049$, and for fathers, $F(1, 28) = 6.37, p < .018$. Tukey's post hoc test ($p < .05$) showed that well-adjusted mother-son dyads had higher rates of facilitative information exchange than did delinquent mother-son dyads. Fathers of well-adjusted sons exchanged more facilitative information than fathers of male delinquents.

Main effects for delinquency status were observed for the parental dyad, $F(1, 28) = 5.90, p < .022$, for the father-adolescent dyad, $F(1, 28) = 5.59, p < .025$, and for mothers, $F(1, 28) = 11.38, p < .002$. In each case, the members of the delinquent families had lower rates of facilitative information exchange than the members of well-adjusted families.

Conflict/Hostility. Significant interaction effects were found for the mother-adolescent dyad, $F(1, 28) = 6.33, p < .018$, and for the parental dyad, $F(1, 28) = 8.00, p < .009$. Post hoc comparisons showed that mother-daughter dyads in delinquent families had higher rates of conflict than mother-son dyads in delinquent families. For the parental dyad, post hoc comparisons showed that parents of well-adjusted male adolescents had higher rates of conflict than the parents of male delinquents, and that the parents of female delinquents tended ($p < .10$) to have higher rates of conflict than the parents of male delinquents.

Dominance. Delinquency status effects emerged for the mother-adolescent dyad, $F(1, 28) = 10.27, p < .003$, and the parental dyad, $F(1, 28) = 4.24, p < .045$. Delinquent adolescents were more dominant toward their mothers than were well-adjusted adolescents. Also fathers of delinquent adolescents were more dominant toward their wives than were fathers of well-adjusted adolescents.

Table I. Means and Standard Deviations for Adjusted Z Scores on Family Observational Dimensions^a

Measures	Delinquent		Well-adjusted		Significant effects
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Facilitative information exchange					
Dyadic measures					
Mother-adolescent	.26 (2.26)	-.80 _a (1.17)	.30 (1.91)	3.12 _b (4.27)	D × S
Father-adolescent	-.55 (1.58)	-.78 (1.40)	.27 (1.58)	1.06 (1.78)	D
Mother-father	-.89 (.55)	-.27 (1.91)	.10 (.94)	1.06 (1.58)	D
Individual measures					
Mother	-.57 (2.48)	-1.39 (1.40)	.89 (1.39)	1.07 (.89)	D
Father	-.27 (1.57)	-1.58 _a (1.13)	.15 (1.39)	1.69 _b (2.13)	D × S
Adolescent	.66 (2.13)	-.01 (2.39)	-.83 (1.25)	.18 (1.71)	
Conflict/hostility					
Mother-adolescent	.70 _b (1.66)	-.51 _a (.10)	-.31 (.28)	.12 (.78)	D × S
Father-adolescent	.37 (1.07)	.07 (1.52)	-.34 (.50)	-.10 (1.08)	
Mother-father	.25 _c (1.32)	-.71 _a (.23)	-.25 (.62)	.71 _b (1.22)	D × S
Dominance					
Mother-adolescent	.16 (.63)	.44 (.60)	-.29 (.50)	-.32 (.37)	D
Father-adolescent	-.05 (.97)	.27 (1.22)	-.02 (.89)	-.21 (1.00)	
Mother-father	-.36 (1.00)	-.37 (.92)	.46 (1.09)	.26 (.87)	D

^aD = delinquency main effect, D × S = delinquency by gender interaction effect. Means with subscript_a are significantly different, *p* < .05, from means with subscript_b, and marginally different, *p* < .10, from means with subscript_c.

DISCUSSION

The central issue of this study is whether the families of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than those of male delinquents. Before this issue is examined, it should be noted that the findings for the main effect of delinquency status are consistent with extant research. In general, families of delinquents evidenced less facilitative information exchange than families of well-adjusted adolescents (cf. Alexander, 1973). Low levels of facilitative communication may impede both the family's ability to resolve difficulties and the adolescent's social-cognitive development (Grotevant & Cooper, 1983;

Hoffman, 1979). As in previous findings (cf. Hetherington et al., 1971; Riskin & Faunce, 1970), it was also observed that mothers of delinquent adolescents, compared to mothers of well-adjusted adolescents, were less dominant toward their adolescents. In light of the fact that mothers typically have primary responsibility for child care and monitoring, this result supports the contention that mothers of delinquents use ineffective control strategies (Loeber & Dishion, 1983). Finally, the results indicated that mothers of delinquents exhibited lower rates of dominance toward their husbands than mothers of well-adjusted adolescents. This finding further suggests that mothers in families of delinquents have relatively low influence.

When the statistical interaction effects are considered within the context of the delinquency main effects, there is some support for the hypothesis that families of female delinquents are more dysfunctional than families of male delinquents. There was more mother-adolescent conflict/hostility and a trend for more parental conflict/hostility in families of female delinquents than in families of male delinquents. In addition, the fathers of female delinquents were more neurotic than the fathers of male delinquents. Hence, in addition to the low facilitative information exchange and low maternal dominance generally observed in families of delinquents, the family relations of female delinquents also had considerable conflict and paternal emotional disturbance.

Although our findings support the contentions of investigators who used self-report methods (cf. Morris, 1964; Nye, 1958; Roff & Wirt, 1984), they contrast with the observational results of Hetherington et al. (1971). The differences between the present results and those of Hetherington and her colleagues are probably due to methodological factors. To reduce error variance, our male and female delinquents were closely matched on arrest records and demographic characteristics. In addition, the use of institutionalized delinquents by Hetherington et al. may have resulted in a ceiling effect, whereby the families of both male and female delinquents may have been extremely dysfunctional. Finally, we used factor-analytic techniques to group the observational measures into conceptual dimensions, whereas the groupings of Hetherington et al. were more subjective.

Interpretations of the results should be made in consideration of the bidirectional nature of family relations. From one perspective, it is certainly possible that female delinquent behavior results from the dysfunctional family relations observed in this study, and that these problems are exacerbated by the father's neuroticism (Barry, 1970). In fact, it has been observed that female delinquents are often more sensitive to, and more easily engaged in, family conflicts than their nondelinquent siblings (Reige, 1972). An alternative perspective, however, is that delinquent behavior among females is less tolerated by parents (Block, 1983) and consequently elicits greater parental

involvement and subsequent conflict. Regardless of the direction of effects, a dysfunctional pattern of family relations is closely linked with delinquent behavior.

From a treatment perspective, our findings suggest that the families of delinquents are especially appropriate for family therapy (Alexander, Barton, Schiva, & Parsons, 1976; Druckman, 1979; Henggeler et al., 1986; Klein, Alexander, & Parsons, 1977). Within such treatment, it seems important to promote positive communication skills in families of female and male delinquents. Moreover, it may be necessary to enhance maternal influence, especially in relation to the adolescent. This change may be facilitated by the development of more effective child control strategies and increased paternal support for the mother's use of such strategies. Finally, it seems that parental conflict may be an especially pertinent treatment issue for families of female delinquents.

The high rate of parental conflict observed in families of well-adjusted males may reflect normal transitions in family processes that accompany individual development during adolescence. Steinberg (1981) has found that the physical maturation of adolescent males is associated with greater assertiveness by sons toward their mothers, who, in turn, become more passive. Adolescent sons also become more deferent toward their fathers. Consistent with a systemic view of behavior, perhaps parental conflict results from maternal attempts to restore equilibrium by increasing power with the husband. Parental conflict in the well-adjusted families may reflect such developmental transitions and, because it is accompanied by high rates of facilitative information exchange, is probably not dysfunctional.

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