



Juvenile Delinquent's Decision Making Capacity in Risk Situations: A Multifactorial Approach

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Abstract

Most research approaches the genesis of risk prone behaviour in juvenile delinquents from a single point of view, psychological or sociological. In our research, we have attempted to eliminate this unilateralism. To this end, we have tested an integrative model composed of the psychological and sociological factors of juvenile delinquency.

The empirical research was performed on a sample of 420 randomly selected juvenile delinquents and a control group of 420 individuals selected by stratified random sampling.

The research methodology consisted of analysing documents (family situation, age, etc.) and applying psychological tests (Nowicki & Strickland's Internal-External Control Scale for Children, McGuire & Priestley's Testing Your Reaction, Zuckerman-Kuhlman's Personality Questionnaire and A.W. Tucker's Inmate Dilemma Test).

Data confirmed that young delinquents are more impulsive and have a higher sensation seeking tendency, but their decision-making capacity in risk situations is not significantly different compared to the control group. Looking at the data of the psychological tests and the descriptors of the social situation of juvenile delinquents, it looks like personality factors are associated with social factors (family shortcomings, low level of schooling, substance abuse, entourage, friends) as important determinants of delinquency.

Keywords

Juvenile delinquents; Decision making; Risk situations; Integrative model

Introduction

Theoretical-experimental approaches

With regard to the genesis of risk prone behaviour in juvenile delinquents, countless research has been carried out. This can be categorised according to the factors considered to be the most important, thus there is research which emphasises social factors (failure or lack of child socialisation, the minor's family- type of family, family atmosphere, the quality of parent-child relationships, parental supervision, parental criminality, level of schooling, using hallucinogenic substances – alcohol, drugs, poverty) other research are based on psychological factors such as impulsiveness, self-control, the necessity to experience thrills, sociability or activity.

Below, we will present a meta-analysis of the research carried out with regard to the factors leading to juvenile delinquents' acceptance of risk situations. We endeavour to do this so as to create a foundation for the research which will later be presented.

Research in the specialised literature can be grouped into nine major categories, depending on the purpose underlying it. These categories are: research based on: thrill-seeking [1-7] degree of impulsiveness [5,8-10] type of self-control [6,11-14] social and family aspects [15-18] educational deficits [19-22] the way the offense is committed (alone or in a group) [15,20,23-28] the juvenile delinquent's age [29] decision making ways (risk perception) [8,30-32] delinquency as fun [33].

Generally speaking, research results show that in juvenile delinquents accepting risk situations, the following factors play an important role: the need to experience thrills (this being influenced by psychological factors such as a high level of impulsivity and low self-control); precarious social conditions (poverty, unemployment etc); the youth's family situation (inappropriate family model, parents or siblings who are delinquents, conflictual family atmosphere); the age group to which the individuals belong (those aged between 14 and 18 are the most vulnerable); group actions. Regarding decision making, research results are contradictory. Some researchers claim that juvenile delinquents are not aware of the consequences of their actions and therefore do not make correct decisions [30], while other researchers claim the opposite [31].

Research Objectives

Starting from the results of research described in the specialised literature, as well as from results obtained from our previous research [33,35] we have created a theoretical model composed of the factors of juvenile delinquency. We have named it the integrative model of juvenile delinquency (Figure 1) [34,35].

The basic factor of this model is risk taking, as any deed which breaks the law involves a certain risk for the person committing it.

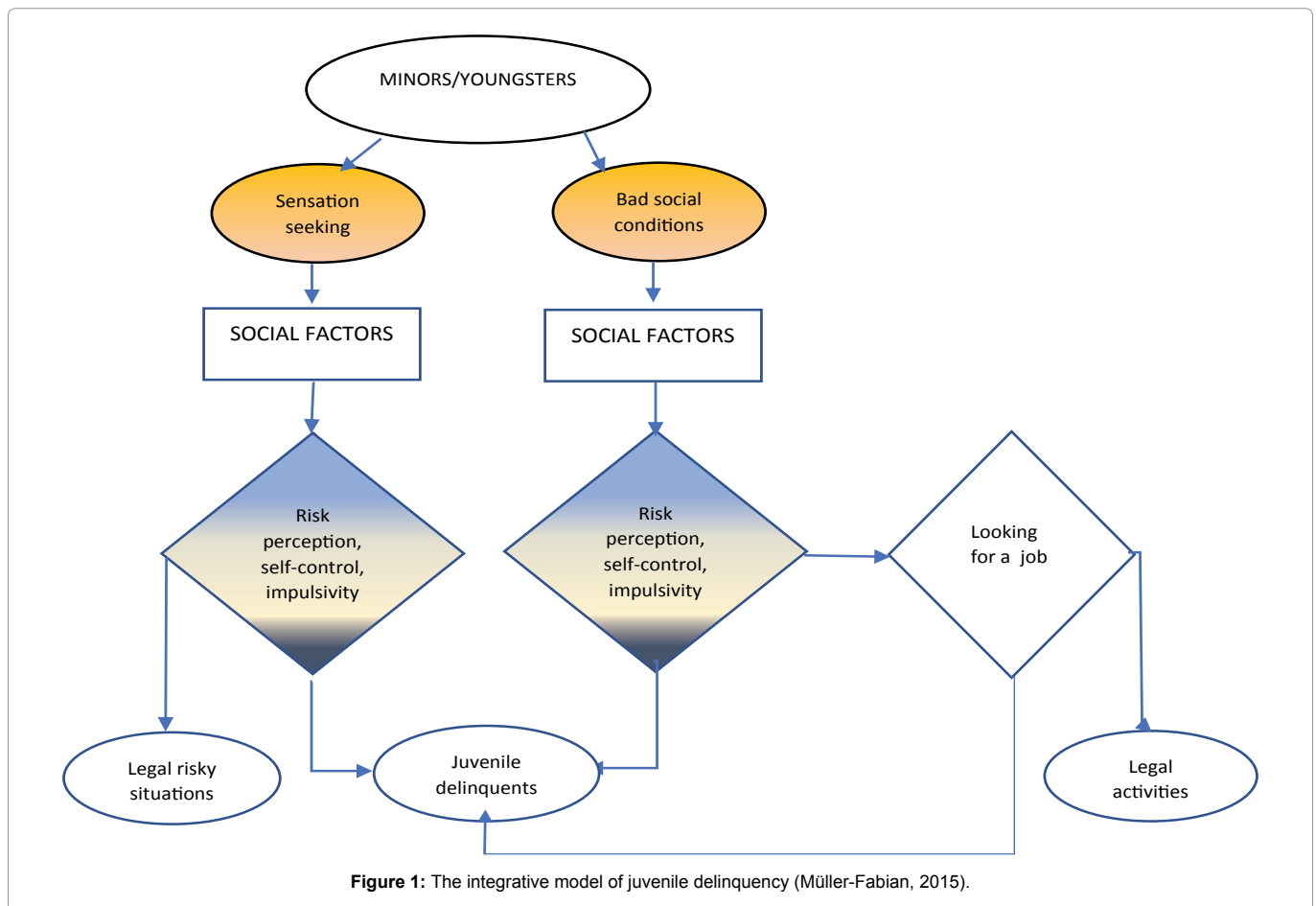
The importance of this model resides in the fact that it approaches the issue of risk in the case of juvenile delinquency from several points of view.

In this model, juvenile delinquents are delimited in two groups. The first group contains thrill seekers; they seek with serenity those situations which involved taking a certain degree of risk. The second group consist of youths with a precarious social situation, which leads to them ending up in risk situations. The members of both groups have two choices: accepting a risk situation leading to delinquency (e.g. theft, robbery, driving without a licence etc.) or experiencing legitimate risky situations (e.g. experiencing thrills by water skiing, paragliding etc. or from the point of view of their precarious social situation: seeking employment, learning a skill etc.).

From the point of view of the way in which individuals perceive risk situations, their level of self-control and impulsivity, there are three possible situations: (1) they think the situation is too risky and seek new; (2) they decide to commit the delinquent deed;

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(3) they adopt a different behaviour.

If the youths cannot find or cannot afford legal situations meant to satisfy their thrill-seeking needs, sooner or later they end up committing delinquent deeds.

The purpose of this research is analysing this model and, though this, outlining the factors leading to juvenile delinquency. According to theories in the literature regarding the factors of juvenile delinquency and the integrative model, we have formulated the following general hypothesis: In the case of youths, accepting risk situations leading to delinquency is caused both by social factors – type of family, family conditions, family atmosphere, parent-child relationships, degree of schooling, substance abuse, entourage, friends etc. – and by psychological factors, such as the need to experience thrills, level of impulsivity, sociability, activity and self-control. With regard to decision making strategies, in a risk situation there is no difference between juvenile delinquents and non-delinquent individuals of the same age.

The results of our research will underline the link between the factors mentioned above and the extent to which they influence the minors' decision to get involved in illegal risk situations, i.e. to choose to commit an offence.

Method and Procedure

Research population

The sample included 420 inmates from Gherla Maximum Security Penitentiary and Cluj External Branch (210 aged between

14 and 18 and 210 aged between 19 and 21), randomly selected (a single criterion was applied, namely age, keeping the mark of the nonprobabilistic sample) and 420 individuals in the control group (210 aged between 14 and 18 and 210 aged between 19 and 21), selected by stratified random sampling.

Research instruments

The instruments used in our research were: Nowicki & Strickland's Internal-External Control Scale for Children, McGuire & Priestley's Testing Your Reaction, Zuckerman-Kuhlman's Personality Questionnaire and A.W. Tucker's Inmate Dilemma Test and document analysis (the juvenile delinquents' files).

Research stages and the tested population

The first stage consisted of file analysis. Thus, we had the opportunity to know the social situation of the juvenile delinquents. The second step of the research was applying the questionnaires on the control population. The items in our questionnaire corresponded with the questions in the files of the juvenile delinquents. The next step consisted of applying standardised questionnaires to both groups. The fourth step involved applying the inmate's dilemma on an imaginary situation to both groups.

Data processing

The research data was statistically processed using quantitative methods. The questionnaire results were processed using the t test and the χ^2 test, and if a significant correlation was found between

variables, we used the regression model to emphasise which of the variables had a bigger impact on the researched phenomenon. In order to apply the statistical methods mentioned above, we used the SPSS statistical software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Results

Results regarding the social factors of juvenile delinquency

After the statistical analyses of the data, we found differences between the delinquent group and the control group with regard to the following variables: family conditions (Chi squared value: 155,98; degree of significance 0,000), family atmosphere (Chi squared value: 315,70 degree of significance 0,000), relationship with parents (Chi squared value: 11,2, significance: 0,001), being enrolled in a special needs or correctional school (Chi squared value:

93,15, significance: 0,000), having been employed or not (Chi squared value: 84,25, significance: 0,000), intensity of alcohol consumption (Chi squared value: 104,63, significance: 0,000).

The youths who grew up in a balanced family (with an appropriate atmosphere, loving parents, good socialisers etc.) are less predisposed to delinquency than those who were not raised in such families (R squared is 46.8%). If the delinquent minors grew up in an appropriate family entourage, they committed fewer offenses (R squared is 13.2%). The reference group had a significant role in committing infractions; thus, 31.6% of juvenile delinquents declared they had belonged to a group of delinquent friends. Juvenile delinquents who grew up in a family with an appropriate atmosphere, did not go to a special school and had been employed prior to committing the offense were imprisoned for a shorter period of time than the other delinquents (R squared is 7.6%).

Results regarding the psychological factors of juvenile delinquency

According to our theoretical model, alongside social factors, psychological factors such as impulsiveness, sociability, self-control, activity and thrill seeking also play an important part in the involvement in illegal risk situations (in committing offenses).

In the case of psychological factors, we applied the t test in order to check whether there were differences between juvenile delinquents and the control group with regard to these factors (Table 1).

The table shows that: in the case of juvenile delinquents, the level of self-control is significantly higher than in the case of the control group (t value: 19,03, degree of significance 0,000); juvenile delinquents are more impulsive (t value: 7,22, degree of significance: 0,000) than non-delinquents; there is a difference in favour of delinquents with regard to thrill seeking (t value: 19,00, degree of

significance: 0,000) compared to the control group; in other words, juvenile delinquents are characterised to a larger extent by the desire to experience thrills; juvenile delinquents are more active (t value: 6,40, degree of significance: 0,000) than non-delinquent youths and juvenile delinquents are less sociable (t value: -2,53, degree of significance: 0,011) than the members of the control group.

Using the regression model we reached the following results: thrill seeking, self-control, impulsivity and activity are in a positive relationship with delinquency, while there is a negative relation between the sociability factor and delinquency (R squared is 43.4%). In the case of a minor delinquent, the higher his/her self-control, the more he/she will be characterised by thrill seeking and the more sociable he/she is, the more offenses he/she will have committed (R squared is 7.7%). The period on imprisonment increases with activity and sociability (R squared is 3.1%).

Decision-making capacity in risk situations

Decision making plays an important role in day to day life, as it ensures behaviour authenticity and coherence. We formulated our hypothesis so that we will be able to compare the decisions of juvenile delinquents with those of the non-delinquents. Applying the dilemma had the purpose of analysing potential differences with regard to decision making strategies in risk situations in the case of juvenile delinquents and non-delinquent youths of the same age.

The number of individuals who chose the first option, namely "I confess nothing" is almost equal for the two groups (308,301). However, a difference can be observed when it comes to the other options. It is interesting to note that double the number of delinquents opted for the last possibility, namely "I confess" (Table 2). We are convinced that this answer is due to the situation they are in – incarcerated. This answer somehow reflects their "behavioural change for the better".

Only this table can illustrate whether there are differences with regard to decision making strategies in the case of delinquents and non-delinquents. In order to find the answer to this question, we need a statistical analysis of the data obtained. This is why, for the next step we formulated the null hypothesis, namely "juvenile delinquents use different strategies for making decisions in risk situations". We used the χ^2 method in order to test the hypothesis (Table 3).

Since the value obtained when applying the Chi-squared test is higher than the critical value, we can abandon the null hypothesis and can accept our initial hypothesis, which states that differences in decision making strategies are insignificant between the two groups studied. Therefore, we can claim that, in risk situations, juvenile delinquents adopt decision making strategies similar to those of non-delinquent youths. Cognitive schemas, which play an important

Table 1: Differences between the two groups with regard to psychological factors.

| Psychological factors | Delinquent | Average | t. value | df | Significance |
|-----------------------|------------|---------|----------|-----|--------------|
| Self-control | Yes | 17,28 | 19,03 | 838 | 0,000 |
| | No | 12,33 | | | |
| Impulsivity | Yes | 19,17 | 7,22 | 838 | 0,000 |
| | No | 15,93 | | | |
| Thrill seeking | Yes | 9,62 | 19,00 | 838 | 0,000 |
| | No | 5,87 | | | |
| Sociability | Yes | 7,67 | -2,53 | 838 | 0,011 |
| | No | 8,08 | | | |
| Activity | Yes | 11,33 | 6,40 | 838 | 0,000 |

Table 2: Answers obtained for the inmate's dilemma.

| Delinquents | Possible answers | | | I confess | Total |
|-------------|------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| | I confess | We both | The other | | |
| | nothing | confess | confesses | | |
| Yes | 308 | 14 | 7 | 91 | 420 |
| No | 301 | 63 | 14 | 42 | 420 |
| Total | 609 | 77 | 21 | 133 | 840 |

Table 3: The result of the χ^2 test.

| | Value | Degree of freedom | Significance |
|----------|--------|-------------------|--------------|
| Pearson | 51,648 | 3 | ,000 |
| χ^2 | | | |
| Total | 840 | | |

df=3, $\chi^2=51,648$, critical value=7,815 at p=0,05
51,648>7,815

part in decision making, proved to be independent of whether the individual is a delinquent or not.

Discussions and Conclusions

Most research approaches the issue of juvenile delinquency from a single point of view, be it sociological or psychological. In our research, we have attempted to eliminate this unilateralism. To this end, we tested an integrative model, composed of the psychological and social factors of juvenile delinquency. We took into account the psychological particularities of the minor delinquent, such as impulsivity, thrill seeking, which are known to intervene in the delinquent's risk taking behaviour; we also took into consideration the level of self-control of the subjects, in order to underline its effect on taking risks. We also underlined those social particularities of the minor delinquent about which – based on prior research – we supposed play a part in the delinquent's taking risky decisions. As a last point in our research, we analysed the differences between juvenile delinquents and non-delinquent youths in risky situations, investigating decision-making strategy.

The results of our research emphasised the fact that, if the minor has the psychological characteristics mentioned above (is impulsive by nature, active, sociable and a thrill-seeker) but does not have an appropriate family environment, not financial security, is not educated as per the requirements pertaining to his/her age, becomes involved in neighbourhood gang activity, which unites many criminal youths, fulfils his/her more or less age-specific needs by committing illegal acts and ends up a juvenile delinquent.

Following our research, we can claim that the general hypothesis formulated by us is confirmed. In the case of youths, accepting risk situations leading to delinquency is caused both by social factors – type of family, family conditions, family atmosphere, relationship with parents, level of schooling, using hallucinogens, entourage, friends etc.) and psychological factors, such as the need to experience thrills, level of impulsivity, sociability, activity and self-control [35,36].

At the same time, we hope that by our research we have once and for all broken the myth of the “uninformed” delinquent, who is not responsible for the deed committed due to difficulties in decision making, cannot assess one's deeds and become involved in illegal situations without understanding them. By testing the potential differences with regard to decision making strategies, both in the case

of delinquent and non-delinquent youths, we reached the result that there are no differences between the two groups in this respect.

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