

## Psychosocial Differences between Male Juvenile Delinquents and Normal Adolescents

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**ABSTRACT:** In criminology, early-onset problematic behaviours among male adolescents are studied to identify contributing factors of juvenile delinquency. This present study aims to compare the psychosocial differences, and the influence of psychological functioning and social context between male juvenile delinquents and normal adolescents. The research design was comparative cross-sectional, involving two groups: male juvenile delinquents (n=101) and normal male adolescents (n=317). Data collected was analyzed for descriptive analysis for demographic comparisons. Pearson correlation and regression analysis were conducted to identify associations among the variables measured. The results suggested that the study sample differed from the control group in almost all psychosocial attributes except self-esteem and attachment to teacher. The present findings provide empirical evidence for practical implications especially in individual assessment in addressing specific psychosocial variables among problematic adolescents.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, delinquency, juvenile, psychosocial.

### Introduction

Rising rates of crime among juveniles have been drawing profound concern for the safety and well-being of this population. The topic of juvenile delinquency is a major recurrent theme in the news following shocking and violent crimes perpetrated by youths against youths (Jaaffar, 2014). Along with this concern, several attempts by local researchers can be traced back in explaining this phenomenon from various predisposing factors (*e.g.*, Ahmad *et al.*, 2004;

Alavi *et al.*, 2012; Ibrahim *et al.*, 2012; Ismail and Anwar 2011; Nasir *et al.*, 2010; Sharif and Roslan, 2011).

Several longitudinal studies conducted in Rochester, Denver and, Pittsburgh on delinquent boys have emphasized a wide range of social conditions, personal characteristics, and developmental patterns linked to sustained involvement in delinquency and drug use (Loeber *et al.*, 1998; Thornberry *et al.*, 1998; Huizinga *et al.*, 1998). These studies weighed the importance of psychosocial attributes as identified risk factors in triggering or curbing delinquency. The belief rests in the notion that while psychological characteristics are responsible in an individual's functioning, the social contexts synergize the inner motivation propelling towards delinquency.

The importance of the psychosocial status of juvenile delinquents is not only limited to predict delinquency and intervention purposes, but has also been extensively studied in response to the issue of age – that is, of criminal responsibility among this population (Newton and Bussey 2012). As the minimum age of crime culpability for children is still undergoing debate, and will continue until such a time as evidence points to strong correlation and public concern is assuaged; scholars suggest psychosocial measures to assess children and youths' psychosocial functioning that may constrain individuals from involvement in criminal activities. In the light of this suggestion, psychosocial measurements pertaining to criminal judgment competence, self-efficacy beliefs, and moral disengagement in contributing towards level of delinquent behaviours are viable for study among the juvenile population. For example, Newton and Bussey (2012) found that children of a younger age were as competent as older children in crime decision making when these psychosocial variables were assessed; suggestion that although important, age may not be a primary triggering variable. Empirically, this study by Newton and Bussey (2012) established the proposal for considering psychosocial variables in dealing with juveniles.

In a qualitative study on juveniles with minority status, semi-structured interviews were conducted to assess the psychosocial background of juveniles from three ethnic groups (Bauer *et al.*, 2011). The researchers decided to focus on trauma, family background, forensic and psychiatric family history, school history, psychiatric treatment received, and criminal history, as what is constituted in the psychosocial operational definition. This particular study

discovered that most juveniles had poor access towards educational and mental health system, besides dysfunctional family backgrounds (Ibid). It was evident that contextual factors are predominant risks that should be highlighted in the subsequent treatment intervention.

However, the studies carried out by Thornberry *et al.* (1998) and Bauer *et al.* (2011) may only be generalized to their localities. The findings may not hold true for the situation of juvenile delinquency in Malaysia. In addition, the instruments used in previous studies may be culturally inappropriate or have no relevancy in Malaysia due to differences in legislation. Nonetheless, the above studies indicate that more psychosocial variables need to be investigated in order to formulate a comprehensive understanding of delinquency contextualized to the local cultural environment.

In the present study, an array of psychosocial variables is listed for measurement: cognitive distortions, self-control, self-esteem, family problem, and authority conflict, commitment to school, attachment to teachers, delinquent peers, and delinquent beliefs. These domains of interest were deduced from previous literatures emphasizing each variable's effect and role pertaining to juvenile delinquency. As such, an integrative approach was adapted in the current study whereby the sociological and psychological components were amalgamated for a more holistic relationship observation.

This study aims to fill the gap in literatures by examining the psychosocial differences between delinquents and normal adolescents, as well as to determine the potential commonalities and psychosocial correlates within this population. The current study is distinctive in the sense that the focus on psychosocial attributes were extended to school, peers relation, and authority figures as sociological means, rather than restrictive to the family domain only. In addition, numerous psychological variables were simultaneously measured to gain clarity for its role and importance in individual functioning.

## **Methodology**

### ***a) Participants and procedures***

A total of 418 respondents were recruited in this study based on the sample selection criteria (N=101 juvenile delinquents, N=317 normal adolescents). The study group was chosen from

one of the correctional institutions in Peninsular Malaysia. The selection of individuals to participate in the control group was done randomly from amongst school-going youths. Permission from the related authorities was obtained prior to this research. Written consent forms were also given to the respondents to obtain their agreement prior to their voluntary participation.

***b) Instruments***

The research instrument was divided into two parts. The first section solicited respondents' demographic information such as age, ethnicity, number of siblings, number of male siblings, and socio-moral status. The second section consisted of a psychometric battery measuring psychosocial variables. Nine (9) scales were identified: cognitive distortion, self-control, self-esteem, family conflict, authority problem, and attachment to teacher, commitment to school, delinquent belief and delinquent peers. The compilation of this psychosocial psychometrics into a battery: Psychosocial Assessment Battery – for Juveniles (PSAB-J).

These instruments were readily available and evidenced good psychometric properties. The items were adapted and piloted to a sample of Malaysian juveniles and youths. Respondents were asked to rate each item based on a five point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), on how it reflects them. Below is a brief explanation of each selected scale variable and its instrument.

***c) Translation Process***

Since all scales were readily available in the English language, all measuring items were translated and adapted in the Malay language for local administration. For this purpose, forward and backward translations were performed by a group of experts and linguists from University Science Malaysia. In brief, the results of the translation process were good. The translated version showed good consistency with the original English version. The final version of PSAB-J was subjected to other validity and reliability tests.

***d) Data Analysis***

Data collected were computed and analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. Demographic information of the respondents was analyzed

using descriptive statistics in order to obtain the summary of the respondents' background. The demographic groupings were also used for comparison purposes in subsequent analysis.

Findings for each scale were reported in mean scores in order to identify the most prevalent type of psychosocial traits among the samples as the number of items differed. T-test analysis was conducted to determine the existence of significant differences in psychosocial factors between the two independent groups. A simple bivariate analysis of correlation was conducted to determine the association between psychological and sociological domains. For this, Pearson correlation coefficient was employed for each independent sample.

**Table 1: Summary of PSAB-J subscales.**

	<b>Scales</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Reliability</b>
1	How I Think Questionnaire	HIT-Q	Measuring cognitive distortion.	30	0.93
2	Self-Control Scale	SCS	Unidimensional scale measuring individual's self-control.	20	0.81
3	Hare Self-Esteem Scale	HSES	Evaluating individual's feelings about self-worth and importance among peers, as students, and as family members.	12	0.83
4	Family Conflict Scale	FCS	Measuring poor relationship with parents as well as the absence of positive support in current family interactions, whether with parents, spouse, or extended family.	9	0.63
5	Authority Problem Scale	APS	Items reflect individual's beliefs that interpersonal relations as exploitive in nature.	6	0.71
6	Commitment to School Scale	CSS	Assessing individual's attitude and belief on education and school constructs.	9	0.71
7	Attachment to Teachers Scale	ATS	Measuring individual's agreement about how much they like and respect their teachers.	5	0.75
8	Delinquent Peers Scale	DPS	Evaluating adolescents' number of friends who are involved in delinquent activities.	8	0.94
9	Delinquent Beliefs Scale	DBS	Assessing individual's beliefs about delinquency.	8	0.94
<b>TOTAL ITEMS</b>				<b>107</b>	

## Results

### *a) Demographic information*

**Table 2** below presents the descriptive results of respondents' demographic information. The respondents' age ranged from 18 – 21 years old. The age mean for the study group was 20.10 (S.D. = 0.78) and for the control group was 19.50 (S.D. = 0.70). Malay ethnicity was predominant in both groups.

Number of siblings was categorized into three classes: 0-4, 5-9, and more than ten siblings. The categorization was made to assess the respondents' family size. Equal percentage of juvenile delinquents were observed in the groups with less than five and less than ten siblings (47.5%). In the control group, half of the adolescents claimed that they have 0-4 number of siblings (54.2%).

As for the number of male siblings, most of the youths in the study and control group have 0-5 male siblings. Around 92.1% of delinquents reported having 0-4 male siblings. This was followed by having 5-9 male siblings (7.9%). In contrast, about 89.9% of the adolescents in the control group have 0-4 male siblings. This was followed by having 5-9 male siblings (9.1%). No youth in the study group had ten or more male siblings while 1% of the control group had ten or more male siblings.

In relation to self-perceived morality, most respondents rated their self-morality as moderate (58.4% for delinquents, and 57.8% for non-delinquents). A similar pattern was observed in self-perceived religiosity. Both groups reported having a dominant representation of youths with a moderate level of religiosity (60.4% for delinquents, and 57.8% for non-delinquents).

**Table 2:** Socio-demographic comparison between delinquents and non-delinquents

Demographic	Variable	D		ND	
		N	(%)	N	(%)
Age	18	5	(5.0%)	157	(49.6%)
	19	11	(10.9%)	54	(17.1%)
	20	54	(53.5%)	89	(28.2%)
	21	31	(30.7%)	16	(5.1%)
	M	20.10		19.50	
	S.D.	0.78		0.70	
Ethnicity	Malay	82	(81.2%)	277	(8.9%)
	Chinese	1	(1.0%)	6	(1.9%)
	Indian	16	(15.8%)	29	(9.2%)
	Others	2	(2.0%)	3	(1.0%)
Number of siblings	0-4	48	(47.5%)	168	(54.2%)
	5-9	48	(47.5%)	132	(42.6%)
	≥ 10	5	(5.0%)	10	(3.2%)
Number of male siblings	0-4	93	(92.1%)	277	(89.9%)
	5-9	8	(7.9%)	28	(9.1%)
	≥ 10	0	(0.0%)	3	(1.0%)
Level of self-perceived moral value	Poor	28	(27.7%)	11	(5.3%)
	Moderate	59	(58.4%)	113	(54.6%)
	High	14	(13.9%)	83	(40.1%)
Level of self-perceived religiosity	Poor	22	(21.8%)	8	(2.9%)
	Moderate	61	(60.4%)	162	(57.8%)
	High	18	(17.8%)	110	(39.3%)

(Note: D = Delinquent; ND = Non-delinquent)

**b) Descriptive analysis**

The mean scores for psychosocial domains were calculated. In order to determine the most prevalent psychological or sociological factor within the study population, the percentage of respondents who scored equal or higher than the mean scores was tabulated. The mean analyses are documented in **Table 3**.

**Table 3:** Prevalence of psychosocial variables in delinquents and non-delinquents

Variables	D		ND	
	Mean	% of respondents scored above the mean (n = 101)	Mean	% of respondents scored above the mean (n = 317)
HIT-Q	49.76	51.5	39.44	47.0
SCS	39.90	54.5	35.82	53.6
HSES	27.53	54.5	26.87	56.2
DBS	20.53	45.2	18.40	38.8
FCS	16.93	47.5	14.55	51.1
APS	12.51	50.5	13.34	51.1
CSS	20.50	45.5	25.50	53.5
ATS	9.93	49.5	10.48	50.3
DPS	11.05	43.6	7.13	36.5

(Note: D = Delinquent; ND = Non-delinquent)

Results from Table 3 depict that the highest prevalence was in SCS and HSES among the delinquents (54.5% for each). A similar pattern was observed among the non-delinquents whereby the highest percentage was observed in HSES (56.2%) followed by SCS (53.6%). The lowest percentage in both groups contributed was found in DPS (43.6% for delinquent group, 36.5% for non-delinquent group).

On the surface, mean scores were higher in the study group compared to the control group for six of the nine scales. In four of the scales, namely HIT-Q, SCS, HSES and APS, at least 50% of the youths in the study group scored higher than the mean. The control group had higher means in the CSS and ATS, which was expected.

**c) Inferential analysis**

In reference to **Table 4**, t-test analysis showed that the delinquents experienced more cognitive distortion ( $t = -4.63, p < 0.01$ ), delinquent beliefs ( $t = 3.22, p < 0.01$ ), family conflict ( $t = -4.02, p < 0.01$ ), and had more delinquent peers ( $t = -4.23, p < 0.01$ ) compared to non-delinquents. In addition, delinquents also demonstrated lower self-control ( $t = -5.17, p < 0.01$ ), lower commitment to school ( $t = 2.60, p < 0.01$ ), and higher authority problem ( $t = 2.60, p < 0.01$ ) to the control group. However, both groups did not show any significant difference in self-esteem ( $t = -1.08, p > 0.05$ ) and attachment to teachers ( $t = 1.05, p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 4:** T-test comparing differences of psychosocial variables between the study and control groups

Variables	Groups	Mean (SD)	Mean Difference (95% CL)	t (df)	p-value
<b>HIT-Q</b>	ND	39.44 (19.87)	-10.33 (-14.708, -5.946)	-4.63 (416)	0.00**
	D	49.76 (18.26)			
<b>SCS</b>	ND	35.82 (7.07)	-4.08 (-5.631, -2.530)	-5.17 (416)	0.00**
	D	39.90 (6.34)			
<b>HSES</b>	ND	26.87 (6.47)	-.66 (-1.867, 0.546)	-1.08 (218.051)	0.28
	D	27.53 (4.95)			
<b>DBS</b>	ND	18.40 (5.20)	2.13 (0.826, 3.42)	3.22 (390)	0.01**
	D	20.53 (6.61)			
<b>FCS</b>	ND	14.55 (5.05)	-2.38 (-3.542, -1.215)	-4.02 (416)	0.00**
	D	16.93 (5.59)			
<b>APS</b>	ND	13.34 (2.86)	0.83 (0.203, 1.455)	2.60 (416)	0.01**
	D	12.51 (2.56)			
<b>CSS</b>	ND	25.50 (6.66)	4.50 (3.527, 6.463)	6.69 (415)	0.00**
	D	20.50 (6.12)			
<b>ATS</b>	ND	10.48 (4.67)	0.55 (-0.477, 1.577)	1.05 (415)	0.29
	D	9.93 (4.26)			
<b>DPS</b>	ND	7.13 (7.79)	-3.92 (-5.740, -2.097)	-4.23 (404)	0.00**
	D	11.05 (8.17)			

(Note: D = Delinquent ; ND = Non-delinquent; \*Significant at the 0.05 level; \*\*Significant at the 0.01 level)

The relationship between all psychosocial variables using Pearson correlation coefficients is evidenced in **Table 5**. In the table, the psychological domains were listed horizontally and the sociological domains were listed vertically. Correlation results for each group were tabulated side by side for comparison purposes.

**Table 5:** Correlation matrix of relationship among psychosocial variables for both groups

Variables	D					ND				
	FCS	APS	CSS	ATS	DPS	FCS	APS	CSS	ATS	DPS
<b>HIT-Q</b>			-0.28**		0.27**	0.33**	-0.29**	-0.22**	0.15**	0.24**
<b>SCS</b>			0.24*	-0.23*		0.30**	-0.13*	-0.42**	-0.35**	
<b>HSES</b>			0.30*	0.34**		-0.23**		0.33**	0.45**	
<b>DBS</b>			-0.38**	-0.31**		0.15**				0.20**

Note: D = Delinquent ; ND = Non-delinquent; \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As shown in the table, the correlation pattern of delinquent and non-delinquent report data differs. In the delinquent group, none of the psychological domains showed significant association with family conflict (FCS) and authority problem (APS). Significant relationships at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels were noted for all the psychological domains with commitment to school (CSS). Three of the four psychological domains are significantly associated with authority problem (ATS). Only cognitive distortion (HIT-Q) is significantly associated with delinquent peers (DPS).

In comparison, for the non-delinquent group, all four psychological domains are significantly associated with family conflict (FCS). Cognitive distortion (HIT-Q) and self-control (SCS) are significantly associated with authority problem (APS). Three of the four psychological domains are significantly associated with commitment to school (CSS) and attachment to teachers (ATS).

Generally, it was first observed that the patterns of correlations found in both groups were similar for school dynamics (CSS and ATS). In relation to commitment to school, both groups showed negative association with cognitive distortion with slightly higher magnitude for the delinquents ( $r=-0.28$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) than the non-delinquents ( $r=-0.22$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Concerning attachment to teacher, all psychological variables except cognitive distortion demonstrated significant association in the delinquent group. For the non-delinquents, only delinquent beliefs did not show any significant relationship. However, all intercorrelations between psychological measures with attachment to teachers showed significance at the  $p<0.01$  level for both groups. The second group of observations focused on internal factors (HSES and SCS). Moderate association was observed with self-esteem for both group ( $r=0.30$ ,  $p<0.05$  for delinquents,  $r=0.33$ ,  $p<0.01$  for non-delinquents). In comparing self-control, significant correlation was seen in a positive direction for the study group ( $r=0.24$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and the opposite direction for the control group ( $r=-0.42$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

The third group of observations focused on delinquent peers. The level of agreement between cognitive distortion with delinquent peers was slightly higher in delinquents ( $r=0.27$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) than the non-delinquents ( $r=0.24$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). In addition, the non-delinquents showed

significant correlation between delinquent beliefs and delinquent peers at the 0.01 level ( $r=0.20$ ).

## **Discussion**

The findings of the present study suggest that self-esteem and self-control were the predominant psychosocial factors for both delinquents and non-delinquents. However, via means analyses; there was no significant difference between both groups particularly in self-esteem. Despite its high prevalence in each group, results in this study imply that delinquents and non-delinquents are equal in self-esteem. This contradicts previous literatures on the role of self-esteem in delinquency (e.g., Sharma, 2012; Donnellan *et al.*, 2005).

The similar representation of self-esteem in both groups can be attributed to the projection of defensive self-esteem (Scneider and Turkat, 1975) by the delinquents. This type of self-esteem is characterized by superficial superiority and brilliance while suppressing negative self-image and self-doubts (Kernberg, 1975; Tracy *et al.*, 2009). It could be that respondents were guided by this type of self-esteem when responding to the questionnaire items, resulting in similar appearances of self-esteem with the non-delinquents. At the individual level, persistence of defensive self-view could possibly 'nurture' narcissism personality (Tracy *et al.*, 2009) that further lead to social maladaptation (Baumeister *et al.*, 1996) and distorted self-image.

The present findings also depict that both delinquents and non-delinquents have similar levels of attachment to their teachers. This particular finding is inconsistent with other researches that indicated low emotional student-teacher bond among the delinquent boys (Thornberry *et al.*, 1998). The most plausible explanation for this difference in the Malaysian population could be due to the nature of the teaching profession. In communal societies such those practiced in Malaysia, educators are viewed as respected and noble conventional figures (Hamdan *et al.*, 2006). Regardless of their actual relationships with teachers, delinquents' agreements on each item measuring this domain were based on their opinions on how teachers should be respected and admired.

Overall, results of the present study assert the important interaction between psychological and sociological factors, especially in school dynamics (commitment to school and attachment to teachers) among delinquents. At this point, this study suggests that adolescents showing psychological maladaptive behaviours would display poor attitudes and actions in schools. Subsequently, screening of adolescents with problem behaviours among students in schools may be traced back to the need for early or counseling intervention. The insignificant relationship between psychological factors and the family conflict factor as well as authority problem in the study sample supports previous findings, particularly in terms of family functioning. Nasir *et al.* (2010) found that family functioning did not show any causal effect on adolescents' psychological health, especially depression. Nasir *et al.* (2010) further suggest the consideration of socio-cultural factors in local settings which value the role of neighbours and extended families in nurturing adolescents without parental presence, lessening the negative effects of family conflicts. Furthermore, while correlational analysis proposed psychological functioning as associated protective factors to positive family environment and law-abiding behaviours in normal adolescents, similar psychological characteristics do not necessarily serve as risk factors in the delinquent population.

Current findings further proposed a significant association between cognitive distortion and involvement with delinquent peers in both groups. Individuals with cognitive distortion are characterized by less effective emotional states and inability to weigh the consequences of his or her behaviour (Mobini *et al.*, 2006). With cognitive distortion, adolescents are prone to normalize delinquent behaviours (Pardini *et al.*, 2005), making delinquent peer association becoming more likely since these behaviours are supported and encouraged (Deater-Deckard, 2001). Similarly, having delinquent beliefs reflect an individual's acceptance of delinquent activities. Consequently, involvement with delinquent peers provides positive reinforcement for delinquency as proposed by Thornberry *et al.* (1998).

### **Practical Implication**

Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, individual continuous assessment can be made for juvenile delinquents throughout the period of probation. In response to the Children Rights Coalition (2012) urging the need for individualized approach to treatment or rehabilitation, this study acts as a prototype. Through the assessment, an individual's psychosocial

adversities can be determined and monitored, followed by appropriate intervention addressing specific issues; without labelling the individual in negative terms. At the same time, this individual's continuous assessment may facilitate the consideration of future plans regarding education, personal growth, employment, etc., after serving probation. This approach offers a more viable, controllable and effective strategy compared to generalizing one-for-all intervention strategies.

### **Research limitation**

This study, however, have several limitations. Since this study involved samples from one correctional institution, research findings should not be generalized to the whole juvenile population. In addition, the psychosocial markers of delinquent females were not examined. This limitation has the potential to be explored in future research.

Due to the statistical nature of the data, it is highly recommended to explore the psychosocial aspects qualitatively. Exploring psychosocial aspects of juvenile delinquents from a qualitative view would complement current findings and benefit stakeholders interested in this area of study in terms of data enrichment, underlying complexities of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour hence, contributing to more knowledge of this population.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study support findings of past studies which showed the existence of psychosocial differences between delinquents and non-delinquents. Subsequent correlational analyses emphasize the interaction among the psychosocial domains within the delinquent population which further urge the need for individual assessment for psychosocial treatment. Such treatment at individual level would assist delinquents to develop positive psychosocial functioning prior to their release after serving probation. This is to facilitate delinquents to become competent individuals as well as preventing future recidivism.

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