

Identity Processing Styles and Canadian Adolescents' Self-Reported Delinquency

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Drawing on research in juvenile delinquency and crime, several parallels are observed with that of research using the concept of identity styles. The study of 1,450 adolescent boys and girls in the 7th through 12th grade was completed to discern if identity theory is useful in detecting self-reported delinquency behavior. Gender and age differences were expected; however, they were not observed to be of major consequences. Rather, a diffuse-avoidance identity style was associated with higher

self-reported delinquent behaviors and a normative or social convention perspective associated with less self-reported delinquency. This discussion briefly explores the findings that support a general theory of crime and the potential contribution identity theory could have for the study of adolescent delinquency. Limitations of this study are briefly recognized.

The prevalence of self-reported delinquent behavior by adolescents remains high. For example, Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley (1993) summarized findings indicating that the annual occurrence of fighting in school (men = 21.6%, women = 13.0%), hurting someone serious enough to require medical care (men = 21.4%, women = 5.0%), or stealing property worth less than \$50 (men = 40.1%, women = 23.5%), is relatively common. Consistently, men report more activity than women in all forms of delinquent behavior outside the family. Statistics indicate a sharp increase in delinquent and risk-taking behavior from the 8th to the 12th grade, although cohort effects have been reported.

Gottfredson (2001) provided a recent review of correlates of delinquent behavior. Impulsiveness and low levels of self-control are associated with conduct problems and disorders (e.g., Farrington, 1995). Endorsement of social norms and conventions with strong social ties are associated with less occurrence of delinquent behavior (see Gottfredson, Harmon, Gottfredson, Jones, & Celestin, 1996; Loeber & Dishion, 1983; McCord, 1979). Similarly, conscientiousness or constraint as reflected in careful, information-based planning is associated with lower occurrence of delinquent behaviors (Caspi et al., 1994).

The relations among low level of self-control, the attention given to social norms or conventions, and conscientiousness and delinquency behaviors have certain parallels in research on identity formation among adolescents. Within one theory of identity formation, Berzonsky (1990) has proposed identity styles that differ in adolescents' approaches to or avoidance of constructing and reconstructing identity. Three identity styles are proposed that involve social-cognitive processing of self-relevant information. The identity styles include diffuse-avoidance, normative, and informational-based cognitive styles.

A diffuse-avoidance style is characterized by delay, procrastination, or defensive-avoidance of making decisions. There are difficulties in self-control and an impulsive component to the diffuse-avoidance style. This identity style is associated with reliance on external locus of control and emotional-focused coping behaviors (e.g., Berzonsky, 1992, 1994; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996). The normative identity style focuses on conformity to the prescriptions and expectations of others. The self is preserved by minimizing either external or self-threats, often through cognitive distortions (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999). The normative identity style has been found to be associated with intolerance for ambiguity and a reported need to maintain structure and closure (e.g., Berzonsky & Kinney, 1995;

Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992; Irvine & Strahan, 1997). Similar to evidence summarized by Gottfredson (2001), the normative identity style is associated with endorsement of social convention, conformity, and reliance on the standards of others. The informational identity style involves negotiating the construction of identity by engaging in processes of active seeking, processing, evaluating, and planning for the development of an identity based on self-relevant information. According to Berzonsky and Sullivan (1992), self-construction is based on testing and revising the self when confronted with self-discrepant information. Further, the informational identity style has been found to be associated with effortful self-exploration, problem-solving coping, and cognitive complexity (Berzonsky, 1990, 1992; Dollinger, 1995).

There are obvious parallels between observations by Gottfredson (2001) and the findings from research on identity styles. Therefore, it is hypothesized that (a) diffuse-avoidance would be associated with more frequent self-reported delinquent behavior, whereas (b) the normative, conformity, and social convention focused identity style and the information-based conscientious style would be associated with less frequent self-reported delinquency.

METHOD

Participants

The data used to assess differences in self-reported delinquency between the diffuse-avoidance, normative, and informational identity styles are from the Youth Victimization, Crime and Delinquency Survey, obtained by the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family in collaboration with faculty members at the University of Alberta. Students in Grades 7 through 12 were surveyed in Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta. A sample of 2,001 students, almost equally divided by gender (ranging in ages from 12–19 years old), was obtained in three sites. Missing data reduced the sample to 1,450 participants divided almost equally by gender.

Measures

Identity. To measure identity style orientations, select items from previous work (Berzonsky, 1989, 1992) were used to assess the diffuse-avoidance, normative, and informational styles. Because the measures used in this study were part of a larger investigation, only portions of each scale were used to keep the total survey of manageable length. All item responses were obtained using a (1) *not at all like me*, to (5) *very much like me* rating scale. The diffuse-avoidance orientation was measured by items reflecting uncertainty as to why the participant was in school,

avoidance of worry about problems, and delay or procrastination in making self-relevant decisions. The items were as follows:

“I’m not really sure what I’m doing in school”; “I guess things will work themselves out”; “Many times, my personal problems work themselves out even if I don’t worry about them”; and “When I have to make a decision, I try to wait as long as possible to see what will happen.”

The normative identity style was assessed by items reflecting a life using parental values, behaving in ways that are expected by others, and a preference to know what is expected and to behave accordingly. The items included the following:

“Mostly, I live my life according to the values I’ve been raised with”; “It is better to always stick to what you believe in rather than to think about other different ideas”; “I prefer situations where I know what I can expect and people behave in ways that are expected of them.”

The informational identity style was evaluated with items assessing the degree of gathering information before making a decision and taking time to be thoughtful and analytic about self-relevant choices. Items included the following:

“When I have a personal problem, I try to think about all the different parts of the problem by themselves, and how they relate to each other”; “When I have to decide on something, I like to spend a lot of time thinking about all my choices”; “When I make important decisions I like to have as much information as possible.”

Each scale had three items and the alphas were adequate (avoidance, alpha = .41; normative, alpha = .40; and information, alpha = .60) given the small number of items (within each set of items, individual items correlated positively with the total score, $ps < .05$). Participants were asked to assess themselves on all three sets of items.

Delinquency. Three indexes of delinquency were used. Lifetime report of drinking more than five drinks, smoking marijuana or hash, use of steroids, or use of illegal drugs is referred to as the drug and alcohol index (scores range from 0 to 4).

Lifetime-report of ever damaging others’ property, stealing something worth \$50 or more, stealing with a group of friends, or breaking into a home is labeled the property crime index (scores range from 0 to 4). Lifetime report of taking something by force; threatening to hurt or harm someone; slapping, punching, or kicking someone; throwing something to hurt another; and threatening another with a

weapon is the violent crime index (scores range from 0 to 4). All responses were recorded as “no” or “yes.” The three indexes were correlated with each other between $r = .46$ to $r = .60$.

RESULTS

Identity and Gender Differences

Using the technique for pure classification of identity style types, mean scores and standard deviations were computed for 1,450 participants with complete data. Participants with scores 1 standard deviation above the mean on one of the three identity style scales, but below the mean plus 1 standard deviation on the remaining two subscales of identity styles, were classified as pure types or styles (avoidance, mean = 8.12, $SD = 2.23$; normative, mean = 10.43, $SD = 2.36$; informational, mean = 10.54, $SD = 2.61$). This very conservative strategy resulted in a reduced number of pure identity styles (avoidance = 148, normative = 179, informational = 232).

To assess for main effects (gender, identity styles) and possible interactions, a Gender \times Identity Style factorial was used in a series of analyses of variance. For the measure of drug and alcohol index, there were significant identity styles, $F(2, 546) = 14.03, p < .0001$, and gender main effects, $F(1, 546) = 6.51, p < .01$. Diffuse-avoidance participants reported more drug and alcohol use (mean = 1.19) than normative (mean = .57) or informational identity style youth (mean = .85). Boys reported more activity (mean = .98) than girls (mean = .74). No significant interaction was observed between identity style and gender of adolescent. Identical findings are found on the property crime index. Significant main effects were observed for identity styles, $F(2, 546) = 6.03, p < .003$, and gender, $F(1, 546) = 7.43, p < .007$. Again, diffuse-avoidance participants reported more property crime (mean = 1.29) than normative (mean = .86) and informational identity style peers (mean = .85). Boys reported more property crime behavior (mean = 1.14) than girls (mean = .83). No significant interaction was observed for property crimes. For the violent crime index, only a significant main effect for gender was observed, $F(1, 546) = 7.10, p < .008$. Boys reported more violence (mean = 1.49) than girls (mean = 1.16). Although not significantly different, the diffuse avoidance youths (mean = 1.44) did manifest slightly more violent crime than the normative (mean = 1.28) and informational identity styles peers (mean = 1.24).

Modeling Analyses

Structural equation modeling provides an additional tool for examining the proposed relation among the identity styles and delinquency (see Byrne, 1998, for a description of this multivariate technique). It has been argued in prior research on

delinquency that the impulse control facets of diffuse avoidance would be associated with greater levels of delinquency. In contrast, the social convention of normative social-cognitive processing, and the planful, organized, and conscientious features of informational decision making, would be associated with less delinquency. Further, prior research on delinquency suggests there should be both gender and age differences. Therefore, a structural equation modeling procedure (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) was used to contrast the identity styles of boys and girls and of younger and older teens as predictors of delinquency. Initial models were developed for each group in which the latent delinquency variable was predicted by the three identity orientation variables. Nonsignificant coefficients ($p > .05$) were trimmed, in the just-identified model analysis, to produce the final overidentified models reported here.

Gender differences. To test whether the causal structure was invariant between men and women, a stacking procedure (Byrne, 1998) was used. A baseline model in which the structural coefficients for men and women were freely estimated yielded a chi-square of 61.94 with 13 degrees of freedom. A comparison model in which the structural paths for women were constrained to be equal to those for men resulted in a chi-square of 63.54 with 15 degrees of freedom. The difference in the chi-square values between the constrained and unconstrained models was not significant, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 1.59, p > .05$.

Age differences. Again, a stacking procedure was used to test the equivalence of models for youths of less than 15 years and those 15 or older. The baseline model in which the structural coefficients for both age groups were freely estimated yielded a chi-square of 58.28 with 12 degrees of freedom. The comparison model in which the structural paths for the older youths were set as invariant resulted in a chi-square of 59.76 with 15 degrees of freedom. The difference between the constrained and unconstrained models was not significant, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 1.48, p > .05$.

Final model. A structural equation model based on the combined 1,450 participants is depicted in Figure 1. The goodness of fit for this model is acceptable: $\chi^2(6, N = 1,439) = 59.73, p = 0.01$, root mean square error of approximation = .05, goodness-of-fit index = .986, and adjusted goodness-of-fit index = .953. The unstandardized value of the loadings demonstrates that the latent measure of delinquency is most strongly weighted by property crime (1.06) and violence (.85) indexes.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, the findings of this investigation parallel evidence summarized by Gottfredson (2001) from the perspective of criminology and juvenile justice. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) proposed a general theory of crime where varying

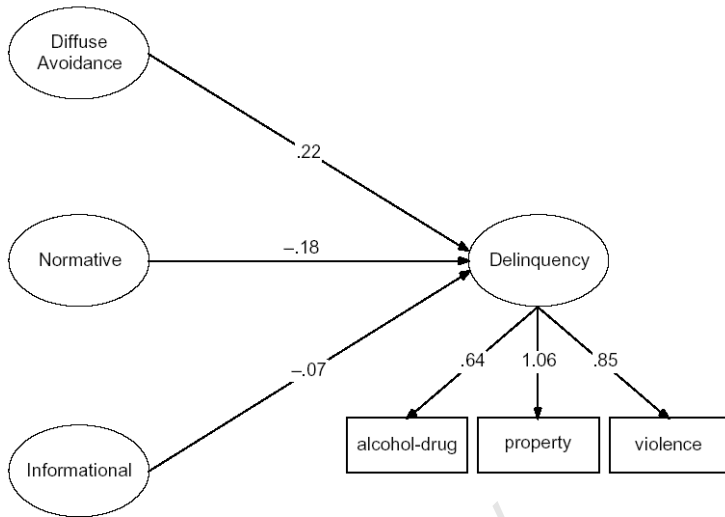


FIGURE 1 The Over-identified Model on the Association of Identity Styles and Self-reported Delinquency.

levels of self-control are thought to be the causal mechanism for predicting delinquency. Certain early socialization experiences are thought to result in incomplete or ineffective socialization. As children enter adolescence, and the opportunity to engage in delinquent behavior increase, adolescents with lower levels of self-control management are inclined to engage in more frequent delinquent acts. These theorists argue that no other sociological factor is necessary to explain crime. For Gottfredson and Hirschi, factors such as delinquent peers, commitment to school or work, or the stresses associated with school failure, are merely correlates of problems with self-control. This theoretical perspective is static in that self-control is thought to be stable after age 8 or so.

The results from this investigation can be interpreted as supporting, in part, the notion that self-control is associated with delinquency in predictable ways. It was observed that diffuse-avoidance adolescents engaged in more delinquent behavior. It may be that the association of diffuse avoidance with external locus of control (see Berzonsky, 1990) is the mechanism that connects this identity style with delinquency. It is also viable, however, to suggest that the alienation or role confusion of this social-cognitive state might account for the connection between diffuse avoidance and delinquency. That is, the vague or diffuse connection between the formation of self and that of behavior may result in diffuse-avoidance adolescents not setting the self-regulatory mechanisms that constrain a youth from deviance or crime.

Other observations in our investigation do not support, in total, the strong assumptions by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) regarding the centrality of self-con-

trol in understanding delinquency or crime. We observed that adolescents who utilize a normative identity style (relying on social convention and norms to regulate their behaviors) engage in less frequent delinquency. Self-control, in this perspective, is to be found in the norms or conventions of one's social environment. Normative identity style youth rely on the past generation and adult norms to guide their conduct. In this case, self-control is not so much internalized into the self as it is constrained by the social conventions of adults.

We anticipated that the informational identity style would be associated with lower levels of delinquency. However, we did not observe the predicted association. It is possible that an informational identity style is less likely to emerge during the junior and senior high school years (Archer & Waterman, 1983). Therefore, the association between informational identity and crime may not be found until we utilize an older sample of post-high school or college-age samples.

The similarity, in our findings, between gender and age, suggests there may be a general universal principle regarding the association between identity and delinquency. This suggestion is similar to the one proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) regarding the centrality of self-control for predicting delinquency. In an era when many look for group differences, this suggestion may be unpopular. However, our results are similar to the findings and conclusions suggested by Gottfredson and Hirschi. That is, the role of identity style in predicting delinquency may be similar over the range of years studied here and between genders.

Our investigation has several apparent limitations. First, our measures of identity style were abbreviated, due to length of the survey and administration time, and may underrepresent the full construct of identity styles as developed by Berzonsky (1990). Second, although our sample was relatively large, we have no way of discerning if adolescents with high frequency in delinquency behavior responded to the survey. Third, our sample was geographically located in a single province of Canada. And finally, we used cross-sectional data that constricts us from examining the stability or fluidity of identity styles and the implications of change in identity styles for the prediction of the association between identity and delinquency. However, additional investigations can correct for such shortcoming as we search for the role that identity theory might play, beyond that of a general theory of crime, for predicting delinquent and criminal behavior.

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