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Family interaction factors: Analyzing their effects on personal, social and school inadaptability, and antisocial and delinquent behavior.

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Abstract

In order to assess the effects of family interaction factors (e.g. inconsistent, harsh or abusive parenting, lack of affection from parents or parental rejection, poor parental supervision, lack of parental involvement with the child, separation/divorce, parental conflict, and lack of affection in the family) in the development of antisocial and delinquent behavior, and personal, school and social inadaptability of youngsters, a total of 333 subjects aged 11 to 13 were evaluated. The results show that youngsters from high-risk families exhibited more antisocial behavior and delinquency, and displayed lower levels of personal, social and school integration. Finally, the results and implications of the study are discussed in the light of designing prevention programs.

Key words: juvenile delinquency, deviant behavior, risk factors, protective factors, prevention, resilience.

Introduction

The literature concerning deviant behavior diverges into two main currents of thought. The first hypothesis, which assumes the learning of deviant behavior (e.g., Feldman, 1989), maintains that deviant behavior is learnt and subjects act accordingly. In spite of the research limitations (e.g., complexity of subject matter, difficulties in observation, problems of measurements, ethical considerations), this approach is grounded in the premise that the learning of antisocial and prosocial behavior is mutually exclusive, though other authors maintain that both behaviors are learnt simultaneously (Fariña and Arce, 2003). The second approach, based on the risk probability, advances the hypothesis of risk/protection from antisocial and delinquent behavior, and profiles risk and protection variables associated with deviancy (e.g., Farrington, 1992, 1996, 2003; Lösel and Bender, 2003). Risk factors are the individual and social variables related to deviant behavior, while protective factors are defined as the individual and social variables associated with prosocial behavior (Farrington, 1992); that is, they provide protection against antisocial and delinquent behavior to those individuals who are exposed to high levels of risk (Ross and Fabiano, 1985). Farrington (1996, 2003) lists 12 main risk factors: pre- and perinatal factors; hyperactivity and impulsiveness; low intelligence; poor parental supervision and rejection of parental attitudes; broken homes; parental criminality; large families; socioeconomic deprivation; peer-group influence; school influences; community influences; and contextual variables. Lösel and Bender (2003) describe nine protective factors, which are: biological and psychophysiological factors; temperament/personality traits; cognitive competence; attachment to reference persons; upbringing and educational climate; school achievement, school bonding and employment; social networks and peer groups; self-related cognition, social cognition and beliefs; and neighborhood and community factors.

In the light of this review of the existing literature regarding protective and risk factors, this study was designed to assess the effects of “family interaction”, which is both a protective and risk factor, on antisocial and delinquent behavior as well as on the personal, social and school adjustment of youngsters under the age of criminal responsibility as established by the Spanish Law 5/2000.

Method

Subjects

A total of 333 youngsters aged 10 to 13, mean age 11.51 years ($S_x=1.27$), were included in the study. Of these, 170 (51.1%) were boys and 163 (48.9%) were girls. All the subjects attended state schools and were in their 6th year of primary education ($n=160$) or 1st year of CSE ($n=173$). Family size ranged from 1 to 15, mean family size was 6 ($S_x=2.3$). 20.8% of youngsters lived in broken homes, and in 10.3% of cases the householder was unemployed.

Procedure

Data was obtained from individual questionnaires administered simultaneously to all pupils in each classroom in four schools in Melilla, a Spanish city in North Africa where the risk of antisocial behavior is relatively high. Subjects completed a section of a questionnaire designed to assess levels of inadaptability, antisocial behavior and family interaction, as well as personal identity and sociodemographic variables (i.e. gender, age, family size, parents' employment). The TAMAI scale (Hernández, 2002) was used to evaluate the levels of personal inadaptability, i.e. the degree of the subject's maladjustment with the world at large (*dissociative maladjustment*, which is expressed by low self-esteem, self-deprecation, fear, guilt and depression); school inadaptability (i.e. low involvement, low school satisfaction, disruptive behavior in the classroom, poor school achievement, that is "*aversion to schooling discipline*"), and social inadaptability (i.e. difficulty or inability to maintain social relationships, leading to greater alienation, both passive and active). The evaluation of antisocial behavior (e.g. breaking bottles and overturning garbage cans) and delinquency (e.g. theft and intimidation, that is offences punishable by law) was carried out using the AD scale (Seisdedos, 1995). For the assessment of the family interaction factor (e.g., Farrington, 2000; Herbert, 1980; Loeber, Green and Lahey, 2003; Scandroglio et al., 2002), a questionnaire based on the FES Scale (Moos, Moos and Tricket, 1995), the SFI Scale

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(Beavers, Hampson and Hulgus, 1985) and the family-related factors in the TAMAI scale (Hernández, 2002) was designed. The questionnaire measured the following parameters: inconsistent, harsh or abusive parenting, parental coldness or rejection, poor parental supervision, low parental involvement with the child, separation/divorce, parental conflict, and lack of family affection. If any of the above mentioned parameters were detected in the child's family interaction context (e.g. parental conflict), the interaction family factor was evaluated as high-risk. Conversely, if none of the parameters were present, the family interaction factor was evaluated as low-risk. Accordingly, 113 (33.9%) youngsters were found to belong to high-risk families.

Results

The results reveal a significant multivariate effect in the levels of inadaptability mediated by the "family interaction" risk factor $F(3,329)=21.764$; $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.166$.

As for the univariate effects (see Table 1), the results show differences in personal, school, and social inadaptability. In particular, subjects from high-risk families showed higher levels of personal, social and school inadaptability.

Table 1. Univariate effects of social inadaptability for the family risk factor.

Variable	MS	F	p	η^2	M_{low}	M_{high}
Personal	1774.56	56.57	0.000	0.146	8.69	13.57
School	912.46	30.92	0.000	0.085	5.98	9.48
Social	633.68	30.66	0.000	0.085	6.93	9.85

Note: D.F. (1,319); M_{low} = mean of the low-risk family group; M_{high} = mean of the high-risk family group.

The results reveal a significant multivariate effect of the "family interaction" risk factor (high v. low) on deviant behavior, $F(2,313)=4.48$; $p<0.05$; $\eta^2=0.028$.

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The univariate effects (see Table 2) show differences in the development of antisocial and delinquent behavior. In summary, subjects from high-risk families report a greater incidence of antisocial and deviant behavior than those from low-risk families.

Table 2. Univariate effects on deviant behavior for the family risk factor.

Variable	MS	F	p	eta ²	M _{low}	M _{high}
Antisocial	43.45	4.37	0.037	0.014	1.32	2.06
Delinquency	58.95	8.98	0.003	0.028	0.61	1.48

Note: D.F. (1,312); M_{low}= mean of the low-risk family group; M_{high}= mean of the high-risk family group.

Discussion

In order to generalize the results, a self-critical assessment of the data would be appropriate prior to commencing the discussion. First, it is impossible to isolate the effects of a variable entirely given that there is no total ecological variation (this is in spite of having undertaken a transversal study). Second, our contrast group was heterogeneous, a critical issue in most studies concerning deviant behavior (Laub and Sampson, 1993), yet our contrast group of non-risk families was not absolutely free of risk, that is, it was not a totally normative group. Thirdly, the results obtained in this study cannot be understood in terms of a causal relationship. Forth, the data were obtained exclusively from self-reports, which may contain distortions i.e. sociably desirable answers. Fifth, generalization to other contexts is impossible given the idiosyncrasies of each individual context. Nevertheless, the results are concordant with other studies concerning different types of populations. Sixth, the study is based on a linear relationship between dependent variables and risk, but this is not necessarily the only relationship possible.

Bearing these observations in mind, we may draw the following conclusions:

- a) Family interaction factor and deviant behavior. Subjects from high-risk families reported more deviant behavior, both antisocial behavior and delinquency.

Though the subjects were under the age of criminal responsibility, the results underline the high probability of these subjects proceeding to a short- or long-term life of crime (Moffitt, 1993; Jefferey, 1996; Fariña and Arce, 2003). Thus, subjects from high-risk families appear already to be involved in deviant behavior prior to reaching the age of criminal responsibility.

- b) Family interaction factor and school adaptability. Youngsters from high-risk families reported more disruptive behavior in the classroom, lower levels of school satisfaction, poor academic achievement, and low school commitment (e.g. Graham, 1988), rejection of schooling and discipline, a higher rate of absenteeism and dropout, poor performance (e.g. Maguin and Loeber, 1996; Robins, Tipp and Pryzbeck, 1991), all of which are predictors of antisocial behavior and delinquency.
- c) Family interaction factor and social adaptability. High-risk youngsters exhibit greater difficulty or inability to establish social relationships, which leads to deeper active and passive alienation. Social inadaptability manifests itself in a lack of social control and respect or regard for others (*social self-adjustment*), as well as a prevalence of attitudes that inhibit social relationships in both degree and nature (*social restriction*), which in turn has a negative impact on social learning (Bandura, 1983). Furthermore, high-risk youngsters adopt antisocialization strategies involving no-learning attitudes and alienation. The lack of social awareness and concern for others brings about diminished cognitive activity in relation to others and leads to impaired affective empathy (i.e. the ability to share the real-life experiences, feelings and emotions of others) (e.g. Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987).
- d) Family interaction factor and personal adaptability. Likewise, youngsters with poor family interaction, in line with reports in the literature (Fuhrman and Holmbeck, 1995), showed higher degrees of personal inadaptability, that is, they have greater difficulties in developing a personal understanding of themselves and reality, i.e. dissociative maladjustment. As for the relationship between personal inadaptability and deviant behavior, two broad hypotheses have been proposed. The first considers deviant behavior a “compensatory mechanism” (e.g. Kaplan, 1972; Toch, 1992). The second, the “protection hypothesis”, proposed by the vulnerability (e.g., Werner, 1986, Zubin, 1989) and competency

models (e.g., Wallston, 1992), argue that positive personal adjustment “protects” the individual from deviancy.

In conclusion, family interaction imposes on high-risk youngsters a social, school and personal profile that makes them vulnerable to deviant behavior even prior to the age of criminal responsibility. Prevention programs should encompass two complementary approaches: one focused on high-risk groups and the other for the population at large. The former requires specific secondary prevention programs aimed at curtailing inadaptability, whereas the latter require the development of primary prevention programs. Our data suggest that prevention programs must be based on a multilevel approach (Rappaport, 1987). Moreover, personal, social and school prevention programs involving these youngsters and their families are not only possible but have also proved effective (for further reference see the review of several of the programs implemented by Farrington, 2003). In terms of the general population, primary prevention programs should be aimed at setting up parental schools designed to foster strategies of positive interaction with their children. The content of these programs should be designed to foster a family environment characterized by integrated family organization, with clear limits for each of its members, a high degree of cohesion, low conflict, good communication, and adequate channels for expressing feelings (Musitu, Román and García, 1996).

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