



Peer-group mediation in the relationship between family and juvenile antisocial behavior



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 June 2014

Received in revised form 31 October 2014

Accepted 4 November 2014

Available online 19 June 2015

Keywords:

Juvenile

Antisocial behavior

Parental monitoring

Family conflict

Family support

Peer group

Mediational effects

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to assess the effects of the variables related to family functioning (parental monitoring, family support, and family conflict) on juvenile antisocial behavior either directly or indirectly through the choice of deviant friends. Thus, the sample consisted of 764 adolescents from the Autonomous Community of Galicia (Spain), from juvenile offender centres (mean age = 17.12, 87.4% males) and students from local schools (mean age = 16.06, 45.5% males). The scales of Valoración del Riesgo en Adolescentes Infractores [Juvenile Offenders Risk Assessment] on parental monitoring, family conflict, family support, antisocial peer group, and antisocial behavior, were applied. The results of structural equation modelling showed a better fit of the mediation model. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for the prevention, risk assessment, and management of juvenile offenders.

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Mediación del grupo de amigos en la relación entre familia y comportamiento antisocial juvenil

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio ha sido medir los efectos de las variables relativas al funcionamiento familiar (supervisión, apoyo y conflicto familiares) en el comportamiento antisocial juvenil, ya sea directamente o indirectamente a través de la elección de amigos desviados. La muestra constaba de 764 adolescentes de la Comunidad Autónoma de Galicia, de centros de menores en conflicto (media de edad de 17.12 años, el 87.4% varones) y de alumnos de centros escolares (media de edad de 16.06, el 45.5% varones). Se les aplicó las escalas de Valoración del Riesgo en Adolescentes Infractores (VRAI) que miden supervisión parental, conflicto familiar, apoyo familiar, grupo de amigos antisociales y comportamiento antisocial. La comparación de los modelos de ecuaciones estructurales muestran un mejor ajuste para el modelo de mediación. Se comentan los resultados en cuanto a sus implicaciones para la prevención, evaluación y gestión del riesgo en jóvenes infractores.

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Palabras clave:

Joven

Comportamiento antisocial

Supervisión parental

Conflicto familiar

Apoyo familiar

Grupo de amigos

Efectos mediadores

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Research on risk factors associated to juvenile antisocial and delinquent behavior has tended to focus on variables related to the family or peer-group. The importance ascribed to these psychosocial variables lies in their relevance to the process of child development and socialization, and their crucial role in internalizing attitudes and acquiring behaviors, the family being the context of reference in childhood and the group of friends in adolescence

(Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Granic & Patterson, 2006). Hence, functional aspects of the family and peer-group have been two of the risk factors empirically correlating most strongly to the development of problem behavior (Dahlberg & Simon, 2006). Moreover, the dynamic nature of these variables enables them to be easily modified through interventions (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), aimed at preventing and protecting individuals from the development of problem behavior. Thus, this study assessed these variables in a Spanish juvenile population.

Since the decade of the 1950s, numerous studies have examined the family context as a risk factor for juvenile antisocial and delinquent behavior. Hoeve et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis, which integrated the results of hundreds of studies published from 1950 to 2007, confirmed the direct influence of family variables on juvenile deviant behavior. Moreover, this review of the literature revealed that the most relevant variables were related to family support and parental monitoring. In relation to support, parental affection and understanding was negatively associated to the expression of delinquent behavior, whereas parental neglect and parental rejection or hostility towards children were positively related to this type of behavior. As for parental monitoring, controlling behavior and knowing the activities and whereabouts of children were negatively associated to involvement in antisocial activities, whereas psychological control and inconsistent parental discipline were positively related to antisocial behavior. In short, parenting styles and skills were a powerful factor for predicting the development of antisocial and delinquent behavior.

Simultaneously, parallel to the research on family variables, an alternative line of research has sought to examine the influence of the group of peers, with results on the risk factors of juvenile antisocial behavior being somewhat more consistent: adolescents involved in deviant behavior have friends who commit deviant acts. Thus, several studies have corroborated an intense positive correlation between juvenile delinquent friends and juvenile delinquent activity (Lonardo, Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2009; Moreira & Mirón, 2013).

Several hypotheses have been proposed to elucidate the effect of the peer-group on antisocial behavior. The traditional hypothesis, or socialization hypothesis, based on the conventional sociological theory, psychosocial models of differential association theory (Sutherland, 1939), and social learning (Akers, 1977) contends that the association with deviant peers, and in turn group influence, foster the development of juvenile antisocial attitudes and behavior. An alternative complementary hypothesis, commonly referred to as the selection hypothesis, is underpinned by assumptions such as the coercion model of Patterson, Reid, and Dishion (1992), which claims individuals with certain previous problematic behavior and attitudes select friends and individuals with similar characteristics (Luengo, Gómez-Fraguela, Garra, Romero, & Lence, 1999).

The results obtained in empirical studies testing either or both hypothesis are inconsistent. A number of studies have found data supporting the socialization process (Rodríguez, 2011), others have found support for the selection process (Kemp, Scholte, Overbeek, & Engels, 2006), whereas still other authors propose the existence of both the selection and socialization process (Burk, van der Vorst, Kerr, & Stattin, 2012). The assumption that both processes play a complementary role in the development of antisocial behavior is consistent with the findings of longitudinal studies (Dishion, Veronneau, & Myers, 2010).

Either of the above hypotheses could be understood in terms of the direct and indirect effects of specific variables on the behavior of adolescents. In the former, the socialization hypothesis reflected the direct effects of the juvenile's relationship with antisocial peers in the development of problematic behavior. In comparison, the

selection hypothesis may be understood as a mediation¹ process, in which certain characteristics of adolescence (personality, family, social, etc.) indirectly influence the development of antisocial behavior, which is facilitated through the link to a deviant peer group. This hypothesis coincides with the notion of risk assessment involving the interrelationship of risk factors, i.e., the different factors associated to a specific behavior do not act independently, but mutually influence each other (Barraca & Artola, 2006; Luengo, Gómez-Fraguela et al., 1999).

This may explain the spike in the last two decades of research on the indirect effects of certain variables, particularly family and group, on juvenile antisocial behavior. Recent studies have corroborated the existence of these indirect effects, with some studies reporting the effects of mediation, whereas others have found moderating effects. In terms of studies on mediation effects, Haggerty, Skinner, McGlynn-Wright, Catalano, and Crutchfield (2013) found parental skills (monitoring, support, and discipline) were not significantly directly related to juvenile violent behavior, but rather parental skills were negatively related to the link with antisocial peers, and in turn this predicted the expression of violent behavior. Thus, parental skills indirectly influenced deviant behavior by mediating the peer group. Similarly, Criss, Shaw, Moilanen, Hitchings, and Ingoldsby (2009) found the inhibitory influence of parental support on antisocial behavior was partially mediated by peer-group acceptance of the juvenile.

As for studies on the moderating effects, Snyder, Schrepferman, Bullard, McEachern, and Patterson (2012) found children of parents with poor educational skills had higher levels of problematic behavior if they had ties with a deviant peer-group, whereas for parents with good parental skills, having deviant friends did not raise the risk of problematic behavior. Other authors have found that juveniles with strong links to a group of antisocial friends had higher levels of problematic behavior when parents had deficient educational skills; conversely, juveniles not linked to a deviant peer group exhibited no problematic behavior regardless of parental skills (Trudeau, Mason, Randall, Spoth, & Ralston, 2012).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, these results of the indirect effects do not agree with the findings of other studies. For instance, De Kemp, Scholte, Overbeek, & Engels (2006) failed to find the expected moderating effects of family variables on the relationship between links to deviant peers and the expression of antisocial behavior. In this study, the levels of parental monitoring, parental support, and psychological control did not significantly mediate peer-group influence on deviant behavior.

This inconsistency in the results may be due to the variability in the risk factors under evaluation and the differences in methodological paradigms. According to the procedure proposed in the MacArthur's method (Kraemer, Kiernan, Essex, & Kupfer, 2008; Kraemer, Stice, Kazdin, Offord, & Kupfer, 2001), which is a reformulation of Baron and Kenny's (1986) standard method for analyzing the influence of third variables, certain methodological criteria² are required that moderation and mediation studies do not always fulfil. The criterion most affecting these studies concerns the independence of the variables in the analysis of moderation. In other words, according to this method, the independent variable and the

¹ In this study the term mediation is used in the statistical and methodological sense employed by Baron and Kenny in 1986 (see References).

² Briefly, for the correct analysis of the moderating effects, the variable considered to be the moderator should precede in time the independent variable, these variables should be independent (not correlated), and there should be a significant interaction between them on the lineal regression. As for the mediation effects, the independent variable should precede in time the variable considered to be the mediator, these variables should be correlated, and under these circumstances an interaction between the variables in the lineal regression would be considered indicative of mediation.

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