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Prosocial reasoning and emotions in young offenders and non-offenders

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyse the cognitive processes (prosocial moral reasoning, perspective taking) and emotional processes (empathic concern, emotional instability, state-trait anger) which interact in predicting aggressive behaviour and prosocial behaviour of adolescents who have committed a crime and those who have not, for the purpose of establishing the predictor variables in both groups. Participants were 440 adolescents, 220 of them young offenders residing in four youth detention centres in Valencia, in which they were serving court sentences (67.3% men and 32.7% women). The other 220 were enrolled in public and private schools within the metropolitan area of Valencia (65.9% men and 34.1% women). The two subsamples were equated in age (15-18 years) and sex, controlling the representation of social classes. Prosocial moral reasoning, empathy, emotional instability, state-trait anger, prosocial behaviour, and physical and verbal aggression were assessed. Hierarchical regression analyses show the differential weight of positive emotions (empathic concern) and negative emotions (emotional instability and anger) in relation to prosocial moral reasoning in predicting aggressive behaviour in adolescents, especially offenders. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for prevention and re-education oriented to social reinsertion of young offenders.

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Razonamiento prosocial y emociones en adolescentes delincuentes y no delincuentes

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio ha sido analizar los procesos cognitivos (razonamiento moral prosocial, toma de perspectiva) y los procesos emocionales (preocupación empática, inestabilidad emocional, ira estado-rasgo) que interactúan en la predicción de la conducta agresiva y de la conducta prosocial de los adolescentes que han delinquido y los que no, con la finalidad de establecer las variables predictoras en ambos grupos. La muestra constaba de 440 adolescentes, 220 de los cuales eran adolescentes infractores internos en cuatro centros de menores de la Comunidad Valenciana, en los que estaban cumpliendo medidas judiciales (67.3% varones y 32.7% mujeres) y los 220 restantes estaban escolarizados en centros públicos y concertados dentro del área metropolitana de Valencia (65.9% varones y 34.1% mujeres). Se equipararon las dos submuestras en edad (15-18 años) y sexo, controlando la representación de las clases sociales. Se evaluó el razonamiento moral prosocial, la empatía, la inestabilidad emocional, la ira estado-rasgo, la conducta prosocial y la agresividad física y verbal. Los análisis de regresión jerárquica realizados muestran el peso diferencial de las emociones positivas (preocupación empática) y negativas (inestabilidad emocional e ira) en relación con el razonamiento moral prosocial en la predicción de la conducta agresiva de los adolescentes, especialmente los infractores. Se comentan los resultados en cuanto a sus implicaciones para la prevención y la reeducación orientada a la reinserción social de los jóvenes infractores.

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The prevalence of aggressive behaviour and delinquency in adolescence is a worrying subject for society in general. Analysing and knowing the determinant factors is one of the main objectives of the research oriented to prevention. In the last decades, what can be called social variables of aggression have been studied, amongst which family and peers are highlighted (Contreras & Cano, 2016; Cutrín, Gómez-Fraguela, & Luengo, 2015; Del Barrio & Roa, 2006; Wertz et al., 2016), together with internal variables, amongst which emotions take central stage (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2010; Carlo et al., 2012; Herrero, Ordoñez, Salas, & Colom, 2002; Llorca, Malonda, & Samper, 2016; Rodríguez, del Barrio, & Carrasco, 2009). Parenting styles are important in personal development and in the socialisation process of children and adolescents, but the social factors of aggressive behaviour explain around 30% of the variance, which present the need to study the psychological, cognitive and emotional processes involved in aggressive and violent behaviour (Del Barrio & Roa, 2006).

Different studies establish that a negative emotionality together with an inability to regulate emotions predict antisocial and delinquent, maladaptive behaviours (Caprara, Gerbino, Paciello, Di Giunta, & Pastorelli, 2010; Eisenberg, 2000; McMahon et al., 2013; Moral & Suárez, 2016). As for empathy, it is considered an important factor that helps adolescents to stop or inhibit their aggressive and delinquent behaviour (Carlo et al., 2010; Mestre, Samper, & Frías, 2002; Van der Graaff, Branje, De Wied, & Meeus, 2012). Empathy, understood as the ability to understand and share the emotional state of another person, encompasses cognitive and affective components. Cognitive empathy, or the ability to put oneself in another's shoes, represents the ability to understand the internal state of the other person. Affective empathy or empathic concern means to share the emotions observed in the other person. It is an affective response to the distress of the other person and therefore it is more focused on the emotions and the estate of that person instead of our own situation (Davis, 1983; Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2001). The affective component in particular has an important role to inhibit aggressive and delinquent behaviours. People with higher empathy are more sensitive, respond better to the emotional expressions of others and are more likely to inhibit harmful behaviours. Different studies have related low empathy with a deficit in execution derived from the difficulty to think in abstract and of understanding the relationship between cause and effect in problems. All this could make it difficult to understand the situation or circumstances of the other person and, therefore, the possibility to share their emotional state (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004).

However, the results of the relationship among empathy, aggressive behaviour, and delinquency are inconclusive. There are studies which confirm a negative relationship between empathy and delinquency, being the relationship between low empathy and delinquency particularly strong in the most violent delinquents (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). These studies also point out that the lack of empathy determines that individuals do not inhibit their behaviour to harm, while a high empathy is a protective factor against aggression (Carlo et al., 2010; Mayberry & Espelage, 2007; Mestre, Samper et al., 2002; Wang, Lei, Yang, Gao, & Zhao, 2016). On the other hand, other studies do not find significant differences between offenders and non-offenders in the cognitive and affective factors of empathy (Schalkwijk, Jan Stams, Stegge, Dekker, & Peen, 2016). It seems that the results differ through different samples and cultural contexts (Wang et al., 2016), depending on sex and whether the affective or the cognitive component of empathy is evaluated (Ashraf, Khalid, & Ahmed, 2014). Also, age seems to be a discriminating variable. In this sense, studies of meta-analysis with samples of adults result in a weak relation between empathy and aggressive behaviour (Vachon, Lynam, & Johnson, 2014). Along the same lines, results with samples of different ages indicate stronger relations

between empathy and delinquency amongst the younger set in relation to older subjects or adults (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004).

Furthermore, the investigation in moral conduct has traditionally highlighted the need to include moral cognition as well as emotions when explaining said conduct. This highlights the importance to analyse and include moral reasoning. The debate between Kohlberg (1984) and Hoffman (2001) has broached the role of cognition (moral thought) and emotions (empathy) when explaining moral development. Following this line, Eisenberg (1986) defended the importance of prosocial moral reasoning, defined as the reasoning that precedes the making of a decision whether or not to carry out a helping behaviour when facing problems that generate a conflict between physical and psychological needs of others and our own wellbeing, in situations where there are no laws or formal social directives. This reasoning contrasts with the moral reasoning oriented to prohibition, which emphasises problems of justice, prohibitions, breaking of the law, dilemmas between the respect for life or death (Kohlberg, 1984).

Eisenberg (1986) defined five levels in the prosocial moral reasoning that develops throughout childhood and adolescence: hedonistic reasoning, oriented to approval, oriented to the needs of others, stereotyped, and internalised, which includes the reasoning based on empathy. The first three levels are present in early childhood, while the last two are developed later in childhood and in particular during adolescence.

In general, the prosocial moral behaviour is conceptually related to moral emotions, such as empathy (worry about others and perspective taking) (Eisenberg, 1986; Hoffman, 2001). Numerous researches have related in a positive way prosocial moral reasoning with prosocial behaviour (behaviour oriented to benefit others) with empathy (Carlo et al., 2010; Mestre, Frías, Samper, & Tur, 2002; Mestre, Samper et al., 2002) and in a negative way with aggressive behaviour (Carlo et al., 2010; Laible, Eye, & Carlo, 2008). Prosocial behaviour of children and adolescents has been related in a positive way with the prosocial moral reasoning oriented to the needs of others and in a negative way with hedonistic reasoning. However, in the later years of adolescence the interiorised reasoning becomes stronger, which includes a more abstract reasoning, the ability to put oneself in the place of the other, and internalised affection (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2011).

The research on moral reasoning and delinquency has been more focused on the cognitive theory of moral development and therefore in the evaluation of the stages of moral reasoning presented by Kohlberg, using instruments like the Sociomoral Reflection Measure by Gibbs, Basinger and Fuller (1992). The results point out that moral judgement competence, meaning the level of moral reasoning, is not a significant predictor of delinquent behaviour in adolescence (Leenders & Brugman, 2005; Tarry & Emler, 2007). Some conclusions give limited support to the relation between a moral reasoning deficit and delinquent behaviour, when the latter is self informed (Beerthuizen, Brugman, & Basinger, 2013).

Other studies are based on other instruments like The Moral Orientation Measure (Stams et al., 2008), which integrates the moral cognitive component (moral judgement) and the moral affective component (empathy). In this case, the results indicate that socio-moral reasoning and empathy are not decisive contributors to the prediction of delinquent behaviour

Therefore, the research on cognitive and emotional processes related to aggressive and delinquent behaviour shows the need to analyse in the offender a non-offender population how the empathy components and impulsiveness or lack of self-control interact with the different kinds of prosocial reasoning in the prediction of aggressive behaviour oriented to harm others physically or verbally, or prosocial behaviour, whose aim is to help the other person and therefore can be considered opposed to aggressive behaviour, having a protecting role against antisocial behaviour

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