



The effect of negative experiences on delinquent behavior of youth in a social withdrawal situation



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between negative experiences, negative emotions, and delinquent behavior among young people in a social withdrawal situation. There were 533 participants in this study and various quantitative analyses were utilized. Results showed that participants with a longer period of social withdrawal were generally less affected by negative experiences, while those with a higher level of social withdrawal were more affected by negative experiences, particularly negative relationships with other people. Also, both negative emotions and higher level of social withdrawal mediated the relationship between negative experiences and involvement in delinquent behavior, with negative emotions displaying a higher mediating effect. This reflects that the root of delinquent behavior is the negative experiences which arouse negative emotions, rather than the social withdrawal behavior itself. Results imply that practitioners should first explore the negative experiences suffered by these young people, so as to provide them the most appropriate support.

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Social withdrawal, which is referred as a continuous exhibition of solitary behavioral patterns (Coplan & Rubin, 2010), has been documented in various international literature (e.g., Jurma, Tocea, Iancu, Ciocani, & Enache, 2014; Kerr, Tremblay, Pagani, & Vitaro, 1997; Rubin & Burgess, 2001; Tajan, 2015). In Japan, youth in social withdrawal is named as *hikikomori* (Saito, 1998), and it has become a social problem in Japan since the last two decades (Dziesinski, 2003; Hattori, 2005; Saito, 2002). The issue has spread to Hong Kong since the last decade (Chan, 2015; Chan & Lo, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d; Wong & Ying, 2006). Hikikomori or social withdrawal youth is defined as those youth who have withdrawn from social connections, as well as participation in school or work for at least six months (Saito, 1998). Many criminological studies have noted the positive relationship between negative experiences and delinquent behavior (e.g., Agnew, 2001; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; Briere, 1996; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Uggen, 2000; Wadsworth, 1979; Widom, 1989), as well as the relationship between negative experiences, negative emotions, and delinquent behavior (Agnew, 1992, 2001, 2006). However, these relationships have never been applied in the study of youth in a social withdrawal situation.

Previous studies regarding the social withdrawal youth shed light on the negative experiences that they suffered, including emotional distress, failure to meet the societal standards, being bullied, parental emotional neglect, poverty, social

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exclusion, discrimination, and suicide (Dziesinski, 2003; Hattori, 2005; Rohlen, 1989; White, 1994; Wong & Ying, 2006). From these studies, it seems that social withdrawal behavior has been associated with negative experiences and emotions. In addition, there were media reports concerning social withdrawal youth who engage in delinquent acts, including hijacking, kidnapping, and homicide (Larimer, 2000; Lewis, 2004; Rees, 2002; Tolbert, 2002; Watts, 2002), but the reported delinquency has not been empirically addressed. Moreover, the way social withdrawal behavior is related to negative experiences and delinquent behaviors lacks sufficient empirical support.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between negative experiences, delinquent behavior, and social withdrawal, which is regarded as a form of social adaptation to negative experiences by Hong Kong social withdrawal youth. As negative emotions intervene in the association between negative experiences and delinquent behavior (Agnew, 1992), this study will also explore this association in the context of youth in a social withdrawal situation. Literature has explained how various factors, such as neighborhoods, parenting and family support, school attachment, self-esteem, peer influences, subculture and opportunity structure, may contribute to delinquent behavior (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). The present study advances the understanding of delinquent behavior by investigating the mediating effects of social withdrawal on delinquency. Also, owing that social withdrawal indicates a social and academic maladjustment in adolescents' development because of their isolation and internalizing difficulties such as having low self-esteem and depression (Rubin & Burgess, 2001), by investigating the relationship among negative experiences, negative emotions, social withdrawal behavior, and delinquent behavior using the sample of young people in social withdrawal situation in Hong Kong, it might be able to generate implications regarding the prevention of young people to turn to social withdrawal and promotion of young people's healthy development.

In the following, literature about negative experiences, negative emotions, and delinquent behavior will be reviewed, followed by the application of these theoretical concepts to the context of social withdrawal youth in Hong Kong.

Negative experiences and delinquent behavior

In order to maximize the inclusion of norm-breaking cases, in this study, delinquent behavior is referred to any type of behavior that goes against the law and violates social norms (Yang, 1978), or those that violate the standards in various aspects of society (Chang, 1999). A perspective on the relationship between negative experiences and delinquent behavior is stated by the strain theories (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938). Refining the strain theories, Agnew (1992) pointed out three kinds of strains which were significantly related to delinquent behavior: failure to achieve positive valued goals, removal of positively valued stimuli, and confrontation with negatively valued stimuli. Regarding failure to achieve positive valued goals, examples included failure to achieve expected good academic results and failure to receive social recognition (Agnew, 1992). These types of negative experiences were associated with aggressive behavior. For the removal of positively valued stimuli, examples included separation and death of parents, separation of spouses, and moving to a new place (Agnew, 1992). When facing adverse experiences, how one adjusted to the events affected the level of social adaptation. A sense of insecurity arising from these events provoked self-destructive behavior such as drug-abuse. With respect to confrontation with negatively valued stimuli, these stimuli aroused feelings of anxiety (Agnew, 1992). Examples included an unsafe living environment, poor parent–child relationship, peer rejection, family violence, and discrimination (Agnew, 1992). If one could not find an appropriate way to adapt to these situations, he or she would tend to display either impulsive aggressive behavior (e.g., revenge and attack), or adopt pessimistic escaping behavior (e.g., alcohol drinking and drug-taking) (Agnew, 1992). All these examples reveal that negative experiences can lead to delinquent behavior.

The link between negative experiences and delinquent behavior has been widely tested in different studies. With respect to failure of achieving positive valued goals, inability to achieve economic goals or unemployment is related to crime in adults (Agnew, Cullen, Burton, Evans, & Dunaway, 1996; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; Uggen, 2000). However, no significant associations were found between expected inability to achieve success in academic and occupational arenas, as well as to gain popularity with peers (Agnew, 2001); this may be because perhaps there is no mismatch between one's current situation and the ideal state which arouses frustration (Kuppens & van Mechelen, 2007). With respect to the removal of positively valued stimuli, divorce of parents, single-parent families, disruption of parent–child relationships through death or separation of parents, lack of parental monitoring, parents' hostility and lack of warmth to their children, and parental neglect were all more likely to involve delinquent behavior (Agnew, 2001; Belknap, 2007; Wadsworth, 1979). Supported by Haines and Case (2005), unsatisfactory parent–child relationships and unclear parental norms were associated with delinquent behavior (e.g., drug-taking). Regarding direct experience of negative stimuli, rejection by peers would result in crime (e.g., Coie, Lochman, Terry, & Hyman, 1992; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990). As stated by various scholars (e.g., DuRant, Getts, Cadenhead, & Woods, 1995; Fitzpatrick, 1997; Haynie, 2001), being bullied led to delinquent behavior, such as drug use. Also, being exposed to sexual abuse increased one's tendency to engage in sexual abusive behavior (Green & Masson, 2002). Besides, witnessing violence between parents was related to antisocial behavior (Maxwell, 2001), whilst experiencing family problems was found associating with gambling (Hardoon, Gupta, & Derevensky, 2004). All these findings confirm the relationship between negative experiences and delinquent behavior.

To summarize, various kinds of negative experiences are related to delinquent behavior. As emphasized by Agnew (1992), delinquent behavior is only a kind of adaptive response when facing adverse experience. Facing negative experiences, one may adopt other kinds of behavior such as chatting with friends, doing sports, and meditation. Therefore, adverse experience may not necessarily lead to delinquent behavior, unless other factors exist. From Agnew (1992)'s viewpoint, adverse

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