



The antisocial phenomenon in adolescence: What is literature telling us?



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ABSTRACT

Our paper offers a reflection on the state of the art of antisocial behaviors in adolescence, seeking to review and synthesize relevant conclusions from developmental investigation on this subject. We begin by identifying the peculiarities of the antisocial phenomenon in adolescence, with particular focus on social and family aspects that may influence social behaviors at this stage, as well as on individual variables that undergo considerable development in adolescence and may play an important role in risk behaviors, such as psychosocial competence, personality, self-concept, and intelligence. The general conclusion points out questions that remain unanswered. Therefore, work seeking to address some of those questions is presented.

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1. Introduction

A general assumption regarding the meaning of antisocial behaviors could be that they describe behaviors that violate social rules intended to promote respect and consideration towards other people's life and property (Burt, Donnellan, Iacono, & McGue, 2011; Kagan, 2004). Such a definition makes it clear that antisocial behavior is a socially

determined construct that may include many different subtypes, levels of destructiveness, forms, functions, onsets, and pathways.

Although we can list several examples of possible antisocial acts, the identification and consideration of antisocial behaviors, especially in adolescence, is still defined by a high level of uncertainty. Actually, “examples during childhood and adolescence range from more or less normative behaviors, such as lying and underage alcohol use, to rarer but more severe behaviors, such as animal cruelty, theft and assault” (Burt, 2012, p. 264). Indeed, not only the manifestations of such behaviors present great variability from individual to individual, but also the very concept of antisocial acts presents a big relativity regarding its classification and level of maladjustment involved. A specific antisocial behavior may be considered as such in one culture, but

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may be accepted and viewed as adjusted in another culture. Also, some antisocial behaviors are almost *normative* for some groups of individuals, even in societies where they are disapproved. We need to look equally at the motivations and levels of pathology behind such behaviors as well, particularly, before adulthood, as it will be further explored, the individuals' behaviors may be motivated by a multitude of factors, some of which do not necessarily involve pathology or intent to harm. In other words, "some criminal acts are indeed normal in the triple sense that: (1) their motivation is moral rather than antisocial, (2) the usual risk factors for crime do not apply, and (3) they do not reflect either social malfunction or personal psychopathology" (Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998, p. 113). Besides, despite being a serious social and public health matter, antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence is often difficult to quantify because most acts are not formally reported to health or legal entities.

In this paper, we consider human development as "a systematic, organized, intra-individual change clearly associated with age-related progressions which achievement has, in some way, implications for the individuals' type of functioning in a future moment in time" (Rutter & Rutter, 1993 in Rutter, 2010, p. 32); thus, using developmental psychology as the framework to understand adolescent antisocial behavior. Therefore, adolescence is envisaged as a period characterized by the emergence of new abilities in a transformative and integrative process that allows the individuals to adapt to the environment and to themselves. In this context, in order to understand the antisocial act from a developmental perspective, we need to understand at what point in the individual's life it occurred, its origins, and what pathways (i.e., persistence or desistance, more or less severe antisocial behaviors) were followed before and after.

2. State of the art in antisocial behaviors

There is no doubt that the study of antisocial behaviors carries an immense complexity due to the variability in antisocial manifestations, individuals, and trajectories, which "constitutes a challenge for theory, research and intervention design" (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001, p. 355). Laub, Sampson, and Sweeten (2006, p. 323) recognize, at this purpose that "there will always be a considerable heterogeneity in criminal offending no matter how many factors are taken into account".

Nevertheless, most authors agree that many different factors contribute to different deviant trajectories. Such factors appear to be related to three major groups – individual characteristics, social environment, and family characteristics – and the impact of each set of variables may be different according to the individuals' age or stage of development (Lahey & Waldman, 2004; Tremblay, 2000, 2010).

When the prevalence of antisocial behaviors is discussed, there is consensus in a particular increase in antisocial behaviors during adolescence. Actually, the rapid increase in deviant behavior during adolescence followed by a rapid decrease after this developmental stage has been named *the age crime curve* (Blonigen, 2010; Moffitt, 1993). Explanations for this phenomenon have included biological aspects, such as the rise of testosterone levels and neurological maturation, and sociological aspects, such as the increase in the environment's role and the peers' influence on the individual's conduct, that typically take place in adolescence (e.g., Blonigen, 2010; Farrington, 2007; Tremblay, 2000). In this regard, Moffitt (1993) argues that both prevalence and incidence of offending are more frequent in adolescence, and that criminal offenders are mostly teenagers because, in childhood, delinquency is more of an individual psychopathology, while in adolescence it becomes almost normative (changing again to being psychopathological in adulthood). In fact, distinctions in antisocial behaviors can be set according to several criteria, but age appears to be, if not the main focus, at least an important topic of discussion for many (Farrington, 2008; Lahey & Waldman, 2004; Moffitt, 1993, 2003, 2006; Patterson & Yoerger, 2002a,b; Thornberry & Krohn, 2004; Zara & Farrington, 2010).

In general, literature points to a relationship between precocity and severity/persistence, considering that the earlier the onset of deviant behaviors, the more severe and persistent the antisocial path will be. It is argued that, when problems start later in development, individuals may have already experienced some prior positive or prosocial opportunities that can serve as protective factors against a persistent delinquent career (Moffitt, 1993, 2003, 2006; Patterson & Yoerger, 2002a,b; Thornberry & Krohn, 2004). Sampson and Laub, however, state that "crime declines with age even for active offenders and that trajectories of desistance cannot be prospectively identified based on typological accounts rooted in childhood and individual differences" (2005, p. 17). Regardless of each particular position, it appears to be consensual that the processes and risk factors involved in persistent and chronic antisocial behavior are different from those involved in adolescence-limited deviancy.

From a distinct viewpoint, Tremblay (2000, 2010), recognizes the importance of the age at which behaviors manifest for the severity and persistence of antisocial behavior, but suggests a differentiation of antisocial behaviors according to types of antisocial manifestations instead of age-of-onset. As Loeber and Schmalting (1985, p. 350) previously suggested, "it would be fruitful to use distinct treatment approaches for covert and overt patterns of antisocial behavior, each focusing on separate behaviors and different etiological variables". In this regard, Burt et al. (2011) found that, contrary to what was anticipated earlier, the age at which antisocial behaviors first manifest is not as important as the behavioral subtypes linked to age-of-onset for the prediction of antisocial trajectories. In fact, some research has pointed out that, not only different antisocial behavioral subtypes may evidence different behavioral trajectories, but also that developmental trajectories of different types of antisocial behavior may not be driven by the same proximal and causal factors (Burt, 2012; Burt, Donnellan, & Tackett, 2012; Lacourse et al., 2002). In particular, Burt (2012) concluded that aggressive (overt) behaviors tend to be more consistent over time, while rule-breaking (covert) behaviors tend to be more frequent during adolescence.

Interestingly, it appears that the distinction according to behavioral subtypes corresponds more or less to the age-of-onset distinction: physical aggression is particularly characteristic of childhood-onset antisocial behaviors, whereas rule-breaking is linked to adolescence-onset antisocial behaviors (Burt, 2012). This may be explained by aspects related to socioemotional development, since "one of the major developmental challenges of a child is to learn to inhibit physical aggression and use other patterns of action in his attempts to achieve his goals" (Tremblay, 2010, p. 347). In fact, not only Patterson and Yoerger (2002a) suggest that overt forms of antisocial behaviors grow during toddlerhood, whereas in adolescence covert antisocial behaviors tend to be more significant, but also Lahey and Waldman's model (2004) associates early-onset of antisocial behaviors with less severe forms of overt behaviors, whereas a later onset appears to be related to covert behaviors and aggressive overt behaviors. In summary, it appears that the differences between distinct behavioral subtypes evidence normative aspects of socioemotional development, as the differences between early and late-onset antisocial behavior trajectories also seem to reflect.

2.1. Gender

Another interesting aspect concerns the role of gender in antisocial behaviors. Despite the fact that the majority of investigations on antisocial behaviors focus mainly on male offenders (e.g., Ayduk, Rodriguez, Mischel, Shoda, & Wright, 2007; Farrington, 2004; Koolhof, Loeber, Wei, Pardini, & D'Escury, 2007), gender differences in antisocial behavior have been widely documented (Bennett, Farrington, & Huesmann, 2005; Berkout, Young, & Gross, 2011; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Lahey & Waldman, 2004; Lahey et al., 2006; Moffitt, 1993, 2003, 2006; Tremblay, 2000, 2010). Such differences can be found in the types of behavior that are adopted by

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