

The Roles of Family Environment, Parental Rearing Styles and Personality Traits in the Development of Delinquency in Chinese Youth

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ABSTRACT

Background: Delinquency in youth is a major public health problem worldwide. The family environment, parental rearing styles, and personality traits have been demonstrated to be important factors in juvenile delinquency. This study investigated family environment, parental rearing styles, and personality traits in Chinese juvenile offenders.

Methods: 290 juvenile offenders and 188 juvenile controls without a record of delinquency who were between the ages of 12 and 25 completed the Family Environment Scale-Chinese Version (FES-CV), Family Upbringing styles questionnaire (FUSQ), Big Five-factor Inventory (FFI-R), and Barrett Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11).

Results: The scores of cohesion, expressiveness, and active-recreational orientation were significantly higher, and the scores of conflict, achievement orientation, and moral-religious emphasis were significantly lower in young offenders than that in young controls ($P < 0.05$, $P < 0.01$, $P < 0.001$). The scores of all 10 dimensions of FUSQ were significantly lower in young offenders than that in young controls ($P < 0.001$). The scores of openness and agreeableness were significantly lower, whereas the scores of impulsivity were significantly higher in young offenders than that in young controls ($P < 0.001$).

Conclusion: The family environment, parental rearing styles, and personality traits affected the development of young delinquency.

Keywords: Young delinquency; family environment; parental rearing styles; personality

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile delinquency is a major public health problem worldwide. In most countries, juvenile delinquency corresponds to an individual that participated in illegal behavior under the age of 17 and that has been charged as an adult for the illegal behavior. However, publications on juvenile delinquency often include individuals older than 17 years of age [1]. In recent years, cases of juvenile delinquency in China have shown an increasing trend towards younger offenders, more complex types of crimes, and more diverse criminal tricks [2,3]. Also, the number of younger offenders that have been arrested is increasing, although some scholars argue that the increase may be caused by a more



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aggressive criminal justice system rather than a real increase in criminal behaviors committed by younger offenders [4]. The mental health of juvenile offenders is not optimistic, and effective prevention of juvenile delinquency has become a major problem worldwide.

Many studies have investigated the psychosocial factors of juvenile delinquency and concluded that family environment, parental rearing styles, and personality traits may be important factors that affect the development of juvenile delinquency [5,6]. However, these research findings have not yet been socially accepted, and cases of juvenile delinquency continue to increase. This study investigated the effects of family environment, parental rearing styles, and personality traits in the development of juvenile delinquency to hopefully provide a scientific basis and practical guidance for effective prevention of juvenile delinquency.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

290 arrested juvenile (12-18 years old) and young adult (19-25 years old) offenders were recruited from detention centers, juvenile detention centers, and juvenile education centers in Jiangsu and Anhui province by a convenience sampling method. 85.17% of the 290 offenders were male and 14.83% were female with an age range of 14 to 25 years, and a mean age of 19.64 ± 2.84 years. Among the 290 offenders, 216 (74.48 %) subjects received elementary and middle school education, 33 (11.38%) received high school, and 41 (13.79%) received college education. 279 (96.21%) offenders were Han Chinese, and 11(3.79%) were national minorities. Of the 290 offenders, 103 (35.52%) were the only child, while 187 (64.48%) had siblings. At the same time, 188 (male 80.85%, female 19.15%) juveniles without records of delinquency were recruited from several middle schools (19, 10.11%), high schools (47, 25.00%), and colleges (122, 64.89%) as controls. The juvenile controls had ages ranging from 14 to 25 years old with a mean age of 19.24 ± 2.91 years. All 188 controls were Han Chinese (100%) people with 111 (59.04%) being the only child, and 77 (40.96%) had siblings. No statistically significant differences in gender and age were observed between offenders and controls ($P < 0.05$).

Study Tools

Family Environment Scale, Chinese version (FES-CV): FES-CV contains a total of 90 items under 10 dimensions: cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, independence, achievement orientation, intellectual-cultural, active-recreational orientation, moral-religious emphasis, organization, and control. Each dimension contains 9 items to evaluate different aspects of the family environment. Higher dimension scores indicate more positive family environments [7].

Family Upbringing styles questionnaire (FUSQ): FUSQ is a self-rating scale containing 120 items under 10 dimensions: accepted - rejected, democracy - dictatorship, respect - humiliation, care - shield, tolerance - indulgence, encourage - punishment, understanding - blame, warmth - rough, discipline - control, expectations - demands. Each item was scored 1-5 points according to the experienced frequency. Higher dimension scores represent more positive way of family education [8].

Big Five-factor Inventory, Short Version (FFI-R): FFI-R is a self-rating scale containing 60 items under 5 dimensions: neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness for evaluation of personality traits. Each dimension contains 12 items and each item is scored from 1 to 5 points [9].

Barrett Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11): BIS-11 is a self-rating scale containing 30 items under three dimensions: attentional, motor, and non-planning impulsiveness. Each item is scored 1 to 5 points. Higher scores indicate more obvious characteristics of impulsivity [10].

Study Procedure

Both group-based and individual surveys were conducted. The questionnaires were collected on the spot. The investigators explained the purposes of the study and the content of questionnaires using survey guidance language before the survey. Subjects were allowed to ask questions. The survey was started after confirming that subjects understood the survey.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 18.0. Student's t test was used to compare scores between two groups. A $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Comparison of Family Environments

Independent sample student's t-test showed that the scores of cohesion, expressiveness, and active-recreation orientation were significantly higher, whereas the scores of conflict, achievement orientation, and moral-religious emphasis were significantly lower in juvenile offenders than that in juvenile controls ($P < 0.05$, $P < 0.01$, $P < 0.001$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of family environment scores between juvenile offenders and juvenile controls ($\bar{x} \pm s$)

	Juvenile offenders (n=290)	Juvenile controls (n=188)	t	P
Cohesion	6.65±2.24	7.70±1.64	4.76	<0.001
Expressiveness	5.20±1.82	5.55±1.52	2.2	0.028*
Conflict	3.26±2.35	2.64±1.94	-3.13	0.002**
Independence	5.16±1.50	5.20±1.39	0.28	0.78
Achievement orientation	6.17±1.85	5.82±1.69	-2.08	0.038*
Intellectual-cultural	2.80±1.98	3.60±2.20	4.01	<0.001
Active-recreation orientation	4.42±2.43	5.13±2.35	3.14	0.002**
Moral-religious emphasis	5.50±1.57	4.92±1.52	-3.97	<0.001
Organization	6.10±1.96	6.30±1.81	1.07	0.285
Control	3.64±2.17	3.25±1.88	-2.1	0.036*

* $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$.

Comparison of Family Upbringing Styles

Independent sample student's t-test showed that the scores of all 10 dimensions of Family Upbringing Styles Scale were significantly lower in juvenile offenders than that in juvenile controls ($P < 0.001$) (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of the Family Education between juvenile offenders and juvenile controls ($\bar{x} \pm s$)

		Juvenile controls (n=188)	Juvenile offenders (n=290)	t	P
Accepted - rejected	Father	47.59±6.50	43.19±6.53	7.21	<0.001
	Mother	47.65±6.54	43.41±6.38	7.03	<0.001
Democracy-Dictatorship	Father	46.02±8.58	41.32±6.71	6.37	<0.001
	Mother	45.23±7.18	41.20±6.99	6.09	<0.001
Respect - humiliation	Father	50.34±6.93	46.77±7.28	5.32	<0.001
	Mother	49.93±7.66	46.82±7.12	4.53	<0.001
Care - shield	Father	43.54±5.08	41.71±5.46	3.66	<0.001
	Mother	43.66±4.66	41.90±4.68	4.02	<0.001
Tolerance - indulgence	Father	48.44±6.50	42.70±6.35	9.58	<0.001
	Mother	48.74±6.73	42.41±6.21	10.53	<0.001
Encourage- punishment	Father	48.96±7.05	44.14±7.41	7.8	<0.001
	Mother	49.53±7.00	44.34±7.76	7.42	<0.001
Understanding - blame	Father	44.26±7.25	39.43±7.19	7.15	<0.001
	Mother	45.16±7.13	40.78±7.73	6.24	<0.001
Warmth - rough	Father	48.65±6.77	45.52±7.29	4.71	<0.001
	Mother	48.82±6.83	46.08±7.77	3.94	<0.001
Discipline - control	Father	43.02±5.60	39.65±5.62	6.4	<0.001
	Mother	42.29±5.30	39.08±5.52	6.31	<0.001
Expectations -demands	Father	45.18±4.84	43.77±4.62	3.2	0.001
	Mother	45.22±4.47	43.71±4.57	3.56	<0.001

Comparison of Personality and Impulsivity

The scores for openness and agreeableness were significantly lower, whereas the scores for impulsivity were significantly higher in juvenile offenders than that in juvenile controls ($P < 0.001$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of Personality Traits between juvenile offenders and juvenile controls ($\bar{x} \pm s$)

	Juvenile controls (n=188)	Juvenile offenders (n=290)	t	P
Agreeableness	43.83±4.62	41.47±5.11	5.13	<0.001
Conscientiousness	42.75±6.50	41.63±6.38	1.86	0.063
Extraversion	40.51±7.28	40.01±6.29	0.77	0.443
Neuroticism	33.11±7.98	34.36±6.97	-1.8	0.073
Openness	42.16±6.43	37.92±4.83	7.74	<0.001
Impulsivity	73.83±13.78	86.16±16.10	-8.94	<0.001

DISCUSSION

Previous studies have shown that most juvenile offenders had little education, often performed poorly in school, and their family economic status is poor, and come from single parent or broken families [11]. The present study did not analyze the socio-demographic variables, but focused primarily on the family environment, parental rearing styles, and individuals' personality traits.

Consistent with previous reports [6,12], the families of juvenile offenders had low cohesion, low education, and more conflicts. In addition, the study also found that the families of juvenile offenders had high control, high moral-religious emphasis, and low emotional expressiveness, which are inconsistent with previous reports [6,12]. In general, the families of juvenile offenders exhibited three high (high conflicting, high control, high moral-religious emphasis) and three low (low cohesion, low education, low emotional expressiveness) features. The three high features indicate that family atmosphere is intense; conflicts and disputes often occurred; and there are more controllable feature than constraints in the family. The three low features indicate that emotional expression between family members is low; family members lack communication and emotional care; and family members lack motivations to learn. Juvenile offenders who do not receive warmth and affection from their adverse family environments, often try to get rid of the family to obtain support or care from society, and become mixed in with bad peer groups, which opens the way for illegal behavior.

Consistent with most reported studies [13,14], juvenile offenders experienced more negative parental rearing styles, such as indulgence, punishment, rejection, blame, control, and dictatorship. Previous studies have pointed out that supervision, principles, and emotional care are important aspects to maintaining healthy family relationships and promote the healthy growth of children. In contrast, parental rearing styles that are too harsh, unstable, or loose are often seen in reports on antisocial children and juvenile offenders [14-17]. These negative parental rearing styles can affect the mental health or development of personality traits in children and adolescents, and can subsequently cause the formation of negative cognitive processing and hostile defiance, and children may eventually develop into offenders [18].

Consistent with previous reports [19,20], this study found that juvenile offenders exhibited low openness and agreeableness, and high impulsivity. Eysenck's theory asserts that criminal offenders are different from normal individuals in innate characters, such as that criminal offenders exhibit differences in neuroticism, extroversion, and psychoticism from normal individuals; criminal offenders are more emotionally unstable and have more irrational behaviors; and have a lower emotional response, more hostile attitudes, and behaviors [21]. Zhou et al study reported that 80% of juvenile offenders with violent crimes and 75% juvenile offenders with non-violent crimes exhibit conduct disorders [22]. These studies suggest that personality traits or conduct disorders are important variables in juvenile delinquency, while family environments and parental rearing styles may interact with personality traits, resulting in delinquent behavior.

In summary, juvenile offenders experienced low family cohesion, low expressiveness between family members, high conflicting family atmosphere, experienced a more negative parental rearing style, and

exhibited personality traits of low agreeableness, low openness, and high impulsivity.

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