Chapter 11

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL AND SOCIAL REPUTATION AMONG PEERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR BEHAVIOURAL ADJUSTMENT IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Estefanía Estévez[1] and Nicholas Emler[2]

[1] Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche, Alicante, Spain;
Departamento de Psicología de la Salud, Av de la Universidad,
Edificio Altamira; 03203, Elche, Alicante, Spain
[2] University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom;
Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, GU2 7XH,
Guildford, Surrey, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Behavioural adjustment problems in schools are becoming matters of increasing concern among professionals of education and psychology. Although it is well-known that adolescence is a period of particular risk for involvement in antisocial activities, there are still questions to be addressed if we are to understand the *whys* behind such behaviours, and especially why this problem is present or is more serious in some adolescents than in others. There is now greater consensus among researchers regarding the role played by family in the origin and development of behavioural problems in children. Particular characteristics of the family environment, such as negative or avoidant communication between parents and children and the lack of parental support , have been highlighted in this context. However, an intrinsic feature of the adolescent period is its opening to new relations with significant others apart from parents, mainly peers and teachers, as well as to new social contexts such as the school.

In this communication we analyse the relevance of social life at school, school environment and school experience in adolescent behavioural adjustment. We particularly examine the link among social experience at school and other two factors that have caught the attention of researchers in the last two decades but that unfortunately have not been addressed in depth in the scientific literature: we are referring to attitude to formal authority and social reputation among peers. With attitude to authority we refer in the present communication to the attitude the adolescent holds towards the school as a

formal institution and towards teachers as formal figures. Social reputation among peers makes reference to the social recognition on the part of others in the same classroom or school. Both factors, namely *attitude to school* and *reputation among peers* seem to be closely associated to antisocial behaviour among students and, from our point of view, both deserve more attention as well as a jointly consideration and analysis due, on the one hand, to their link and join contribution to the explanation of certain risk behaviour that occur in schools and, on the other hand, to their important implications for the design of prevention and intervention programs at the school settings.

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Behavioural adjustment problems in schools have lately become a significant concern for teachers, parents, psychologists and society in general, due to the negative consequences these behaviours have for the teaching-learning process, the psychological adjustment of aggressors and victims, as well as quality of social interactions in educational settings (Estévez, Musitu, & Herrero, 2005; Smith & Brain, 2000). Although it is well-known that adolescence is a period of particular risk for involvement in antisocial activities, it is also true that there are significant individual differences in the frequency and stability of such behaviour. Thus, and following Moffit's (1993) adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour theory, some adolescents will not participate at all in such behaviours along this developmental period, many of them will behave antisocially temporarily, and few of them will show a persistent and stable antisocial behaviour; stability of this behaviour seems to be closely linked to its extremity.

For the minority of youths who commit extreme antisocial behaviours, Moffit suggests that there is a causal sequence beginning very early in life with the formative years are dominated by cumulative and negative person-environment interactions. She argues however that apart from these extreme cases, almost all adolescents commit some antisocial or even illegal acts, which can be understood as an *adaptative response to contextual circumstances* and even *normative* rather than abnormal. And finally others abstain completely, thus raising questions about the factors explaining these individual differences.

FACTORS RELATED TO BEHAVIOURAL
ADJUSTMENT IN ADOLESCENCE

Research focused on factors that may underlie these problems has documented the association between antisocial behaviour in adolescence and particular individual and social factors, these latter relating mainly to family and school contexts, the most important social contexts for development and psychosocial adjustment in this period of life. Studies examining the link between individual characteristics and behavioural adjustment in adolescence have stressed the role of biological, genetic and organic pathological syndromes, as well as psychological variables such as a tendency to irritability and impulsiveness, low frustration tolerance (Baron & Byne, 1998), general low satisfaction with life (MacDonald, Piquero, Valois, & Zullig, 2005), and lack of empathy or the ability to put oneself on another's place. On this last, for example, some adolescent offenders have been found to be

unable to anticipate the negative consequences of their actions for their victims (Dykeman, Daehlin, Doyle, & Flamer, 1996; Evans, Heriot, & Friedman, 2002; Olweus, 2005). It is also possible, however, that in other cases aggressors carry out these actions fully aware of the negative consequences of their acts and precisely because their motivation is to cause hurt; in these cases there is a considerable gap in the development of the emotional dimension of empathic skill.

With reference to contextual factors, research has regularly linked family environment and school environment on the one hand to psychosocial and behavioural adjustment problems in adolescence on the other (Estévez et al., 2005; Murray & Murray, 2004; Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2002). The quality of adolescent-parent, adolescent-peer and adolescent-teacher interactions influence, and may determine, the way adolescents perceive themselves in relation to others, their attitudes, and their behaviours (Estévez, Jiménez, & Musitu, 2007; Jessor, 1991; Werner, 2004). In this respect, there is considerable consensus among researchers regarding the role played by the family in the origin and development of behaviour problems in children. Particular characteristics of the family environment such as the presence of frequent and unresolved conflicts (Crawford-Brown, 1999; Cummings, Goeke-Morey & Papp, 2003), lack of parental support (Barrera & Li, 1996), and negative communication or absence of communication with parents (Dekovic, Wissink, & Mejier, 2004; Stevens et al., 2002), enhance the probability of developing socially inappropriate behaviours in other social contexts such as the school.

This can be explained in part because social interactions in the family context may either foster or inhibit abilities such as empathy, which are in turn closely related to antisocial behaviour against others. As Paley, Conger, and Harold (2000) remark, children establish their first social relations with parental figures and the nature of those parent-child relationships and the context in which they are sustained may determine the social skills and social relations the child will develop with others later in life and in other settings. Henry, Sager and Plunkett (1996) found that adolescents with parents who engage in positive reasoning to solve problems, and who described their families as high in cohesiveness, were more likely to report higher levels of perspective taking when trying to understand another individual's feelings or emotional state. Also Estévez, Murgui, Musitu and Moreno (2007) found, in a sample of adolescents, a mediating effect of empathy in the relation between quality of family environment and involvement in violent aggressive behaviours at school.

But it is also true that an intrinsic feature of the adolescent period is its opening to new relations with significant others beyond parents (mainly peers and teachers) and to new social contexts such as the school. If family environment is an important buffer against antisocial behaviour, commitment to school and social relations with classmates and teachers are not less relevant. The conclusion in Thornberry's and colleagues (1991) work is that both attachment to parents –defined in their study as perception of warmth, liking, and absence of hostility in family interactions– and attitude towards school play a major role in explaining adolescent involvement in antisocial behaviours. School factors, then, must be also considered in depth.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The term *school environment* refers to the social construction of interactions and perceptions that teachers and students develop about the school context (Trickett, Leone, Fink, & Braaten, 1993) and, therefore, it is a reflection of positive or negative feelings about the social climate of the context in which they all interact (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). A positive school environment exists when students feel comfortable, valued and socially accepted in a climate based on support, mutual respect and trust (Moos, 1974). Yoneyama and Rigby (2006) distinguish two principal elements that constitute this positive climate, the first being support and respect from teachers, and the second enjoyment of relationships with peers in the classroom. Moos, Moos and Trickett (1989) also considered these two dimensions, identified by them respectively as teacher support and affiliation among peers; the former refers to the amount of help, trust and attention the teachers offer to students, the latter to the degree of concern and friendship students feel for one another. These authors add a third dimension to define the school environment, namely involvement in school activities, which refers to degree of students' attentiveness, interest and participation in class activities.

Research has shown, on the one hand, that quality relationships with teachers buffers against development of misbehaviours at school, while negative teacher-student interactions adversely affect students' psychosocial and behavioural adjustment in schools (Blankemeyer, Flannery, & Vazsonyi, 2002; Reinke & Herman, 2002). On the other hand, peer relations in educational settings may also significantly influence adolescent's emotions and behaviours. Peers can exert a crucial influence on participation in risk behaviours and antisocial acts (Dishion, 2000; Barnow, Lucht, & Freyberger, 2005), but they can also provide beneficial opportunities to learn socially accepted values and attitudes, or to acquire interpersonal skills such as the ability to handle conflicts (Hartup, 1996; Laursen, 1995).

Considering the three dimensions of school environment proposed by Moos et al., (1989), research has documented that perceiving peers in the classroom as friends or colleagues, having positive interactions with teachers, as well as being academically successful, are factors related to perception of school as a useful learning context for the acquisition of relevant knowledge and for future social promotion, and as a valuable setting in which to share enriching experiences with others. Students sharing those perceptions will feel more comfortable and liked in this setting, will express more positive attitudes towards teachers and the school, and will not normally exhibit behavioural problems in this context (Jack et al., 1996; Molpeceres, Lucas & Pons, 2000; Samdal, 1998). A negative school climate, in contrast, based on unhealthy teacher-student and classmates-student interactions, reduces students' academic and social prospects (Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Murray & Murray, 2004). This fact is extremely important if we take into account that school experience is a key factor related to the subsequent orientation towards institutional systems as a whole, with clear implications for conformity with established social norms (Emler, 1993; Rubini & Palmonari, 1998), as we will analyse in more depth in the following section.

School experience is therefore a key aspect in relation to adolescent psychosocial and behavioural adjustment that seems to go even beyond what one may consider *normative* misbehaviours or *minor* antisocial acts. Recent work as part of the Edimburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime has shown that some of the most important factors related to criminal records and delinquency in adolescence belong to the educational setting. McAra and McVie

(2007) concluded that having being excluded from school in secondary education and leaving school at the age of 16 were among the stronger predictors in this sense. Smith (2006) found that both truancy and school exclusion, together with level of attachment to teachers and parental commitment to school were closely correlated to misbehaviour at school, and also to delinquency.

These results raise the question of the effectiveness of including expulsion from school as a measure to reduce or prevent new misbehaviours and to punish aggressors. Tyler (2006) argues that people obey established norms and social rules if they believe these norms and rules are legitimate and if they respect formal figures and institutions, and not just because they fear punishment. This idea is again connected to the attitude people hold towards authority. Is school exclusion always interpreted as a punishment by the aggressor? If there is no trust in school authority, one could even imagine that this measure would be interpreted as a *gift* for some of them, as a badge of honour in their search for a reputation as rebellious and non-conforming.

REPUTATION AMONG PEERS

Emler and Reicher (1995) propose that some young people may act knowingly to foster a bad reputation. In order to understand the actions of young people so motivated, these authors point out that "it is necessary to appreciate the social framework within which of their actions occur. Two features of this framework are considered in particular; each assumes a special importance in adolescence. One is the institutional framework of society, experienced most directly by adolescents through their formal education and through contacts with various agencies of the state. The other is the informal social group, and in particular the peer group." (p. 143). The institutional framework is examined in more detail in the next section. Here we consider the relationships between reputation among peers and involvement in antisocial behaviours.

Barry (2006) interviewed 40 youths with serious behavioural problems, the majority of them stressing as an important reason to behave antisocially the need "to gain a sense of belonging through identity with friends" (p. 48). Barry also argues that "many of these young people suggested that their family upbringings had not been a source of support or encouragement for them, resulting in them often turning to friends for company and social identity". Thus, creating and sustaining a reputation among friends seems to be a key factor to understand some adolescents' propensity to participate in risk activities and display behavioural adjustment problems. From this perspective, antisocial behaviour may be understood as part of a reputational project in which the first *witnesses* are peers in whose company the act is carried out, and the choice to break rules is a public self-presentation to gain a particular kind of identity (Emler & Reicher, 1995).

According to these authors, the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of a reputation is essential to all adolescents –especially among peers– and with that purpose, they choose a particular self-presentation to publicly promote this reputation. For some, the deliberate choice is an antisocial or even delinquent self-image. Hence, as Emler (in press) points out, one may regard reputations, including *delinquent reputations* as in fact among the goals of such acts. As other studies have also indicated, involvement in risk (or even illegal)

activities can be rewarding for some youths in terms of their perceived status with friends (Carroll, Hattie, Durkin, & Hougton, 2001; Carroll, Hougton, Hattie, & Durkin, 1999). In the study of reputation conducted by these authors (Carroll et al., 1999, 2001), both adolescents at-risk and those who behaved antisocially regarded themselves as non-conforming and wanted to be perceived by others in this way (for example, they liked to be known for breaking rules or doing things against the law). For members of these groups, therefore, norm-breaking goals were significantly more important than for the group of not at-risk adolescents who reported a higher educational goal orientation and gave more priority to their academic image than to their social image.

But what are the *whys* behind the search for a delinquent reputation? Emler (in press) suggests that youth turn to antisocial behaviour basically as a result of their disappointment or lack of trust in authorities. This process may start at home, or at school when children increase contact with other peers, on many occasions beyond the supervision of adults. In this new social environment, they are exposed to both positive and negative acts on the part of others, and in the case of the latter might normally look to school authorities (or even the criminal justice system) for protection. As children approach adolescence, they start questioning those formal authorities as they realise that their protection is not perfect. Thus, for some, antisocial behaviours are attractive precisely because they appear to offer an alternative source of protection, through the achievement of a reputation based on strength, bravery and toughness. In the next section we analyse in more detail the role played by attitudes to teachers and school as authority figures and formal institution.

ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL AND TEACHERS

In Hirschi's classic, *Causes of Delinquency* published in 1969, the author argues that human beings have a natural tendency towards deviance. For this reason he finds it more interesting to ask why people *do not deviate*. His explanation is that that tendency is controlled by the individual's bonds to society. In particular, Hirschi talks about four elements that reduce antisocial behaviours: (1) attachment to others (e.g. parents and teachers in adolescence), (2) commitment to conformity, (3) involvement in conventional activities, and (4) belief in the moral validity of conventional values and social norms. Moreover, as other authors such as Thornberry and colleagues (1991) have suggested, it seems that there is a temporal causal ordering starting with attachment to parents followed by commitment to and involvement to school, followed in turn by acceptance society's norms.

In particular and according to Hirschi, adolescents with strong attachment and commitment to school are less likely to engage in deviant activities than those with weak bonds. Subsequent longitudinal studies carried out with youths from different cultures have supported his conclusions, showing that these two factors are negatively associated with antisocial behaviour (Leblanc, 1994; Torstensson, 1990). Gottfredson (2001) defines, in this context, attachment to school as an emotional link and the extent to which the person likes school or finds the work done there as satisfying; commitment refers to having an educational goal, that is to say, high educational aspirations. This result is also in line with Carroll's et al. (1999, 2001) aforementioned work showing that delinquent goals and educational goals seemed to be somehow opposite.

Hirschi also mentions that belief in the moral validity of conventional social norms is an important factor linked to antisocial behaviour. Conformity with school and society norms is related to the significance that adolescents give to the institutional order. Let us examine this idea more in depth following the argument by Emler and Reicher (1995, 2005). As these authors remark, formal education provides most children with their first direct experience of an institutional system of authority; given the time spent at school and its importance in their daily lives, one may expect that attitudes to teachers as formal figures and to school as a formal institution would be related to attitude to authority generally, and this has indeed been confirmed in several studies showing the strong correlation between attitudes towards teachers and attitudes towards the police and the law (see also Emler, Ohana, & Dickinson, 1990; Emler, Ohana, & Moscovici, 1987, Levy, 2001; Rubini & Palmonari, 1998).

Attitudes to both teachers and the police have been related in turn to misbehaviours in schools as well as to more general antisocial behavioural patterns in adolescence (Musitu, Estévez, & Emler, 2007; Loeber, 1996; Tarry & Emler, 2007). Furthermore, some studies with samples of secondary students measuring levels of antisocial behaviour and attitudes to teachers and police, have found attitude to teachers to be a stronger predictor in comparison to perception of police (e.g., Levy, 2001; Molpeceres, Llinares, & Bernad, 1999). In the research carried out by Molpeceres et al. (1999) teachers received the most negative scores in the general sample, and moreover these were more closely related to orientation towards transgression than were attitudes to formal authority as represented by police. What these authors concluded in their study is that the moral judgement of the teacher is a crucial aspect in the development of the general orientation to formal norm systems.

The general thesis reflected in these findings is related to the perceived functions of the institutional order, and was briefly exposed in the previous section. Students are expected to support the formal system and obey those who are formally authorized; in exchange they are offered protection and resources. However, as recently argued by Tarry and Emler (2007, p.172) "Cognitive change across childhood also supports a growing capacity to differentiate between the principles and the practice of formal authority. For some children this differentiation exposes a gap; in their experience such authority is neither impartially exercised nor does it offer them reliable protection against victimization". When that happens, some adolescents take the decision to seek an alternative means of protection, an *informal* solution. In this sense, antisocial acts such as writing graffiti, thefts, or defiance of teachers could be translated into "I neither trust you nor have confidence in your help and protection. I both want to and am able to defend myself".

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Both attitude to school context and reputation among peers are related to degree of behavioural adjustment at school. Individual differences in these variables contribute to the explanation of why some adolescents engage in antisocial behaviours and other do not. In general, adolescents who display negative attitudes to formal figures and institutions, such as teachers and the school context and who search for social recognition as non-conforming individuals, are more likely to develop behavioural adjustment problems. School environment and school experience are key factors in determining the desire for a particular reputation

among peers as well as attitudes in relation to the school as a formal institution. Thus, misbehaviours at school may be reflecting the need to establish a social identity and gain recognition while conveying a message of rejection of formal authority.

These findings have some relevant practical implications. First of all, it is important to highlight that interventions should not only focus on the particular individuals involved; this would be to overlook relevant contextual factors that need to be taken into consideration to understand and mitigate the problem. Intervention programs that improve family climate and relationships with parents, while improving commitment to school and attitudes to teachers and educational centres would be very useful. School-based prevention and intervention programs should consider several levels of intervention. For instance, numerous programs focused on changing the school and classroom environment as a whole have been proved to be effective in reducing behavioural adjustment problems in adolescence (a wide review can be found in Gottfredson, 2001).

Teachers' commitment to put into practice all these strategies is crucial, as is teacher training through short courses including an overview of the risk and protective factors related to behavioural adjustment in childhood and adolescence, as well as on how to handle conflict situations that might arise among students; many teachers would find this information very useful since sometimes they cannot do more than they already do simply because they do not have the suitable resources. Cooperative learning is also highly recommended in preference to competitive strategies in the classroom. Cooperative learning helps students to get to know each other, thus providing a step closer to reducing social integration problems among classmates and enhancing quality relationships and friendships. In cooperative tasks everybody makes a contribution in the activity, since the final result depends on the effort of each member in the team.

Together with these proposals, there are other concrete measures to be applied directly with students. As Gottfredson (2001, p. 226) remarks in her book *Schools and Delinquency* "school-based programs aimed at altering individual behaviours, skills, attitudes, or beliefs have been shown to reduce problem behaviour for all age groups and for both general populations and high-risk populations within each age group". This includes, among others, strategies for promotion of empathy and non-violent confrontation techniques, self-management and emotional control instruction, empowerment to students to seek and benefit from positive identities (instead of bad reputations), as well as enhancement of participation practices in a democratic environment in the classroom that enhance students' feelings of support and belonging. Setting up these practices would improve students' general attitude to the school context and would probably reduce unruly and antisocial behaviours.

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