

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR AND SELF-CONTROL IN ADOLESCENCE: A STUDY IN A TUNISIAN CONTEXT

Slah eddine BEN FADHEL¹ & Sihem MATHLOUTHI²

ABSTRACT

Many psychological studies explain the deviant behavior of young people by mentioning weaknesses in their ability to exert self-control. The relationship between the antisocial behavior of youth and lack of self-control provides a useful first explanation but calls for further analysis of the issue. In this study, we try to explore the complexity of this relationship between the different forms of social deviance and behavioral self-control processes in a Tunisian adolescent population confronted with delinquency. The study is based on a sample of 112 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16 of both sexes who have dropped out of school early and who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The participants responded to a self-reported deviant questionnaire designed for this purpose as well as to a scale of self-control capabilities. The main results confirm the link between the antisocial behavior of young people and their weak self-control abilities. At the same time, the study reports on the complexity of this correlation in its internal dynamics.

Keywords: Deviant behavior, antisocial behavior, Self-control process, Adolescent, Tunisian Context.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the anti-social behavior of young people, both in their diversity of expression and in their psychological mechanisms, has always aroused the interest of researchers. The different forms of anti-social behavior emanating from the often difficult and changing contexts of life represent an expression of the individual's failure to adapt to the demands of the social group to which s/he belongs.

To explain these deviant behaviors among young people, psychology has always favored and highlighted the internal factors specific to the subject, even if these factors remain strongly determined by the social group and the cultural context. In this way, the concept of self-control has often been mentioned as the main mechanism explaining these socially deviant behaviors. Thus, many psychological studies establish a direct link between deviant behaviors and self-control capacities (Baumeister & Heatherthone, 1996; Bauer and Baumeister, 2011; Tangney, Baumeister & Boone, 2004).

These capacities consist in the individuals' skills to control their impulses and modify their emotions and thoughts (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Usually, behavioral self-control is defined as the ability to replace or modify one's internal responses and interrupt unwanted behavioral tendencies and impulses, and therefore prevent their activation (Tangney, Baumeister & Boone, 2004)

¹ Department of Psychological Sciences, College of Education, Qatar University

² Department of Psychology, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, University of Tunis

As a result, these studies show that individuals who commit antisocial acts generally have a real difficulty in controlling their behavior and managing their emotions. At the same time, it is pointed out that young people who demonstrate satisfactory self-regulatory capacities are less likely to engage in deviant behaviors (Tangney, et al., 2004; Baumeister & Vonasch, 2015; Baumeister, & Vohs, 2016).

In addition, it has been pointed out that a low level of self-control is generally associated with a high degree of externalized and internalized behavioral problems during childhood and adolescence (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000). Likewise, successful behavioral self-regulation is one of the premises for good social adaptation in adolescence. (Lengua, 2006; Raffaelli, Crockett & Shen, 2005).

Thus the failure of self-regulation designated by the term Ego depletion by Baumeister and Heatherton (1996) is explained by failures in the internal individual functioning (Baumeister, Muraven, & Tice, 2000) and by an exhaustion of the subject's resources of self-control (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016).

From this perspective, the control and regulation of emotions is often evoked as being the factors responsible for the transgressive behaviors of young people and the failure of self-control would be at the origin of deviant and antisocial behaviors, such as interpersonal violence, self-harm and drug abuse. These behaviors very often appear from the start of adolescence, thus marking the entire process of the individuals' socialization. This developmental phase is particularly critical with the risk of the appearance of different forms of deviant activities and the choice of a specific life trajectory.

During adolescence, self-control is a complex process particularly valued in our modern societies. It involves the individuals' capacities to manage their emotions and impulsiveness, on the one hand, and to resist peer influence, on the other (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007; Lanctot N. & Leblanc M. 2002)

Along these lines, self-regulation of behaviors is a complex process that requires close attention in order to understand its internal mechanisms and various implications, particularly during the adolescent phase.

In addition, the intercultural studies carried out in Switzerland, the United States or Russia, confirm the link between delinquent behavior and the level of self-control (Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007). These studies underline the strong explanatory value of a low level of self-control on this subject even before variables linked to the social context such as parental influence. The verification of this relationship in a country in the south of the Mediterranean can thus enrich the cultural data on the question.

Today, although this relationship is confirmed by extensive research, it remains to explore the nature of this relationship and its expression with the various forms of deviance. This is the goal that this research aims to achieve in a specific cultural context.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedure

The sample is made up of 112 out-of-school adolescents who are followed in a rehabilitation center for young people in difficulty located in the city of Tunis.

These adolescents are taken into care because of their antisocial behavior (theft, violence, etc.)

They all have dropped out of school early, suffered from social insecurity and evolved in generally dysfunctional family structures.

They are aged 13 to 16 ($M = 14.67$; $E.T = 1.23$) and are 70% boys and 30% girls.

After the approval of the management of the establishment and the consent of the parents and adolescents, the administration of the different scales took place on the premises of the Center in the context of individual interviews.

Tools

In order to measure adolescents' self-control capacities and their deviant behaviors, we used two main tools; a self-control scale and a deviant behavior questionnaire.

- The self-control scale by Tangney, Baumeister and Boone (2004) assesses the skills that an individual has to control his impulses, to act and to modify his emotions and thoughts.

The scale is made up of 36 items. Each answer is measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (doesn't look like me at all) to 5 (looks like me perfectly).

The items are presented in the form of statements divided according to five dimensions:

- Self-discipline: this sub-scale consists of maintaining good self-discipline: not allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by your emotions, maintain your concentration and above all resist temptation.

- Deliberate / non-impulsive actions: this dimension measures the mastery of undesirable impulses: managing anger of the moment, thinking before acting and not being verbally unpleasant.

- Health habits: This measure indicates having good health habits (adopting healthy practices) and limiting health-related control problems such as drug abuse.

- Reliability: This dimension refers to the ability to maintain order in the environment, respect commitments and persevere in order to achieve long-term goals.

- Ethics and values: It designates the social values to be applied when undertaking a social activity, whether of an interactive, professional or educational nature.

- The Deviant Behavior Questionnaire: We constructed a questionnaire to measure deviant behavior, taking inspiration from the self-revealed delinquency questionnaire by Le Blanc (1996). This questionnaire includes 12 items that assess three types of deviant behavior practiced during the last six months: consumption of psychoactive substances (4 items), theft (4 items) and aggression (4 items). All of the constructed items refer to statements to which the subject must respond according to his degree of agreement on modalities ranging from (1) rarely to (4) always.

Example items: "Do you ever insult others using bad words?"

"Do you ever get hold of something that doesn't belong to you without asking permission?"

Adaptation of tools

To adjust the tools to our population, we adapted the measurement scales according to the method proposed by Vallerand (1989). Thus, all the items of the different instruments used were first translated into Arabic and then a reverse translation (translate / back-translate). Then, a first version of each questionnaire was subjected to a pre-test with two groups composed each of seven adolescents in difficulty aged 13 to 16 years, which made it possible to introduce the necessary adjustments when formulating some items of the questionnaire.

Subsequently, the reliability of the items was calculated by internal consistency analysis, thus obtaining Cronbach's alpha indices between .70 and .90.

We analyzed the internal validity of the two scales by confirmatory factor analysis in order to account for the estimation of the saturations of the factors inherent in each instrument.

Both scales have acceptable psychometric qualities. The self-check measurement scale has a reliability index (Cronback's Alpha) of .71. Confirmatory factor analysis explains 46.13% of the total variance. Regarding the deviating behavior assessment scale, the reliability index is satisfactory (.88) and the factor structure of the tool is confirmed and reveals a total variance explained at 76.01%.

Results

1- The link between the frequency of deviant behaviors and the level of self-control

First, we sought to determine if there would be a correlation between, on the one hand, the frequency of deviant behavior, through the stages of gravity as determined by Le Blanc (1996) (i.e., stage of appearance and stage of exploration) and on the other, the level of self-control as revealed by scores on the self-control scale.

The results demonstrate the existence of a significantly negative correlation between self-monitoring abilities and the frequency of deviance ($r = -.624 / p < .05$). This finding tells us that there is a strong association between the two factors relating to deviance and self-control, which means that a low level of self-control capacities corresponds to a frequency of deviant acts.

The following figure clearly expresses the negative meaning of this relationship.

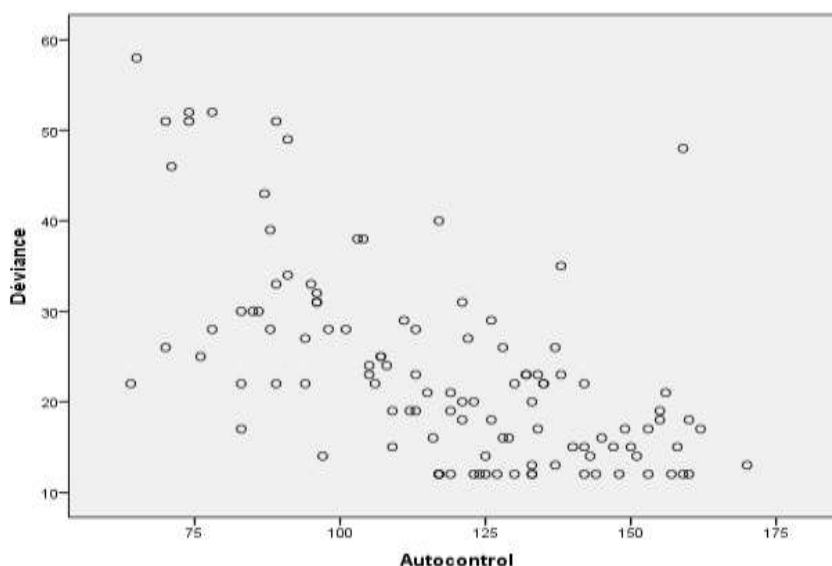


Figure 1: Frequency of deviant behavior according to the level of self-control

These results are consistent with many studies such as those by Le Blanc (2010) and Tangney et al. (2004) noting the existence of a difference in the intensity of the deviance depending on the stages of gravity of the acts committed.

They also corroborate researches demonstrating poor behavioral self-control skills of adolescents who are unable to internalize social norms (Nováková & Vávrováb, 2015). Indeed, the more young people transgress the legal rules and the norms of the societal system, by adopting inappropriate social behaviors, the more they express their difficulties to self-regulate their behaviors in an effective way (Baumeister et al., 2005).

2- The links between forms of social deviance and self-control capacities

In this section, we seek to determine this relationship more precisely by carrying out an analysis of the correlations between the three types of deviance and the five dimensions of self-control.

The results in Table 1 reveal the existence of significant general correlations between the three factors of deviant behavior (theft, aggressive behavior and substance use) and the five dimensions of self-control (self-discipline, non-impulsivity, reliability, ethics values and health habits).

More specifically, the analyses reveal negative links between substance use, theft and aggressive behavior on the one hand, and self-discipline, non-impulsive actions and health habits on the other. The deviant behaviors of young adolescents find their origin in a form of failure in the implementation of self-control mechanisms and in the management of impulsiveness.

Furthermore, positive links were found between the three variables of deviance and two dimensions relating to self-control, namely reliability and ethics and values. This result is somewhat unexpected, but it can be explained by the social values specific to groups of delinquent pairs. Indeed, these groups retain a certain internal social coherence with their own rules and values, which allows them a certain autonomy on the fringes of society. As such, certain studies (Santarelli, 2016; Prairat, 2012) show that groups of young delinquents are found to have a form of positive social self-esteem with values ensuring the internal cohesion of the group.

Table 1: Pearson correlation coefficients between the three types of deviance and the dimensions of self-control

	Substance use	Theft	Aggressive behavior
Self-discipline	-.68*	-.50*	-.67*
Non-impulsivity	-.52*	-.42**	-.56*
Reliability	.43*	.27*	.39*
Health habits	-.41*	-.32*	-.52*
Ethics values	.44**	.46**	.68**

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$

3- Predictive values of the self-control dimensions on each type of deviance

In order to further clarify the relationship between our two main variables, we sought to assess the extent to which the dimensions of self-control (self-discipline, reliability, health habits, non-impulsivity, ethics values) allow us to predict the scores obtained on the three factors of deviant behavior (aggressive behavior, theft and consumption of psychoactive substances). For this, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed in order to specify the prediction values of each of the dimensions of the self-control on the factors of the deviance

Table 2: Multiple linear regression on the three factors of the deviance

Model	Dependant Variable	Predictors	Beta	F	Adjusted R2
1	consumption of psychoactive substances	self-discipline	-.68**	F (1, 110) = 95,58**	.46
2		self-discipline health habits	-.60** .22*		
1	aggressive behavior	reliability	.68**	F (1, 110) = 96,08**	.46
2		reliability self-discipline	.47** -.43**		
3		reliability self-discipline ethics values	.47** -.38** .13*	F (3, 108) = 60,69**	.62
1	theft	self-discipline	-.50**	F (1, 110) = 38,54**	.25
2		self-discipline reliability	-.37** .28*		
3		self-discipline reliability ethics values	-.29* .28* .24*	F (3, 108) = 21,75**	.35

**p<.001 ; *p<.05

The results confirm the correlations observed previously and reveal the following conclusions:

- Concerning the consumption of psychoactive substances factor, the analysis reveals a significant model ($F(2, 109) = 56.46$; $p < .001$) which provides 50% explanation for this type of deviance. Self-discipline ($\beta = -.60$; $p < .001$) is a significant predictor of psychoactive substances consumption, while health habits are reinforcers of this type of deviant behavior ($\beta = .22$; $p < .05$). Finally, among young people, the low level of self-discipline constitutes the strongest predictor in the explanation of the psychoactive substances consumption. On the other hand, substance use is positively influenced by health habits.

- If we are interested in the theft factor for example, the regression model is significant ($F(3, 108) = 21.75$; $p < .001$) allowing to explain 35% of theft. Reliability ($\beta = .28$; $p < .05$) and ethics and values ($\beta = .24$; $p < .05$) can be considered as reinforcing factors of theft. On the other hand, self-discipline ($\beta = -.29$; $p < .001$) is considered to play an inhibiting role in this type of deviant act.

- Regarding aggressive behavior, the results show that self-discipline ($\beta = -.38$; $p < .001$) has a significantly negative effect in explaining the variance of these behaviors. In contrast, reliability ($\beta = .47$; $p < .001$) and ethics and values ($\beta = .13$; $p < .001$) have a significantly positive effect. In addition, the explanatory model is adjusted significantly ($F(3, 108) = 60.69$; $p < .001$) and explains 62% of the variance of aggressive behavior.

In general and among the factors of self-control, it is the low capacity for self-discipline that constitutes the common predictor of the three types of deviance.

DISCUSSION

These first results confirm in a certain way the various studies on the subject (Tangney, et al., 2004; Baumeister & Vonasch, 2015; Baumeister, & Vohs, 2016) by demonstrating the

existence of a negative link between self-control and the frequency of deviant acts. However, at the same time, they demonstrate the complexity of this correlation in its internal dynamics. Indeed, there are differences in the influence of the different dimensions of self-control on the types of deviance and that needs to be more considered in theoretical models.

Our study allows us to shed more light on the activation of deviant behaviors from the analysis of the differentiated dispositions of behavioral self-regulation in young people in difficulty according to the nature of their acts. However, it would be imprudent to issue a pronouncement on the fate of this population and to categorize it in a rigid typology of deviance. The continuous and evolving nature of deviant behavior suggests a certain transformation in an occasional typology linked to adolescence (Born, 2013) or an evolution towards other more persistent forms, marking the beginning of a deviant life trajectory (Born & Glowacz, 2014).

In this perspective, our data serve to update the classic postulates of the psychology of deviance and developmental criminology. These data explain the frequency of the involvement of young people in difficulty in transgressive acts, while climbing stages, by the sequence of a number of activities of heterogeneous gravity (Le Blanc & Girard, 1998).

In addition, the data recall the logic of the social fragility to which this category of young adolescents is exposed, according to which deviance gives meaning to a way of life that does not have any (Serano, 2008).

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