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PROBLEM BEHAVIOURS OF SINGAPORE YOUTH

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings based on an extensive survey of Singaporean adolescents. It examines the behavioral problems of Singapore youth according to school misconduct, antisocial acts, and substance abuse. Differences according to gender and school types are also presented. In addition, it discusses the relationship between problem behaviors and adolescents' relationship with fathers and mothers. The findings indicate that behavioral problems was significantly linked to parenting behaviors with stronger correlation with fathers' parenting behaviors.

Introduction

According to the literature, antisocial behavior peaks in adolescence. They include a wide range of specific activities such as aggressive acts, stealing, vandalism, lying, skipping school, and running away, and are usually considered together, because many times they actually occur together (Kazdin, 1987). A variety of factors are related to whether or not an adolescent engages in problem behaviors, ranging from individual characteristics such as self-efficacy, poor interpersonal relationship, lack of academic achievement to supportive parents, family closeness, relationship with other adults in the environment, and relationships with peers (Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin Feldman, 1988; Leung & Lau, 1998).

In Singapore juvenile delinquency is of growing social concern. Police statistics reported a rise in the number of juvenile crimes as well as an increase in the seriousness of the crimes. This study seeks to explore: (1) the pattern of problem behaviors among Singapore youths, (2) gender and school types differences in problem behaviors? (3) relationship between problem behaviors and parenting behaviors of fathers and mothers.

Method

Subjects and Sampling Procedure

The questionnaire survey was conducted in 1997 involving 748 students aged 16-19. Of these, 49 were 16 years old, 265 were 17 years, 262 were 18 years, and 172 were 19 years old (mean age = 17.4 years). There were 365 males and 363 females. The students were selected by cluster sampling. Care was taken to ensure an equal proportion of representation from the different school types: junior college, polytechnic, and Institute of Technical education, which reflect the different academic standings well as socio-economic status of the students' family backgrounds. Males and females were almost equally represented within each of the three school type subgroups as well as in the total sample.

Measures

Behavioral problems refers to frequency in problem behaviors and misconduct in school and outside. This was measured by 14 items of problem behavior. These

items were clustered in three broad categories: school misconduct (e.g. truancy, disobeying teachers and school rules, tardiness); substance use (alcohol drinking and smoking); and delinquent behaviors (vandalism, shoplifting, fighting, running away from home and sexual behavior). The behavioral adjustment scale was derived by combining all 14 items.

Parental behaviors scale comprised 40 items measuring adolescents' perception of the parenting behaviors: warmth (which assess parental affection and support); parent-child communication (assessing degree of openness and disclosure and the quality of affect in parent-adolescent communication) ; and parental control assessing strictness/supervision, autonomy granting, inconsistency; coercive and psychological control, and use of induction. Fathers' and mothers' behaviors were rated separately on these scales.

Procedure

Participants were asked to indicate if they had been involved in any of the problem behaviors in the last one year. For each item, a choice of two responses was offered: (1) Yes or (2) No. ANOVAs were performed to determine gender differences as well as school types differences in problem behaviors. Correlational statistics were conducted to explore the relationship between behavioral adjustment and parenting behaviors of fathers and mothers. Finally, - tests were conducted to investigate differences between fathers and mother's parenting behaviors according to adolescents' behavioral adjustment.

Results and Discussion

As seen in Table 1, losing temper and becoming aggressive was the topmost frequently reported problem behavior, reported by 55.9% of the respondents. The phenomenon of teen aggression has indeed been a matter of growing concern in Singapore. It was highlighted in the Straits Times which reported that many of the riots were sparked off by seemingly trivial provocations such as staring or rude remarks. About one in 10 of violent crimes reported to the police in 1995 and 1996 were a result of staring (The Straits Times, 4 May, 1997). These violent acts were sometimes committed out of boredom. In 1997, at least 300 younger offenders were dealt with for rioting (The Straits Times, August 3, 1998).

The next most frequently reported problem behaviors were school-related misbehaviors such as skipping classes (33.6%), tardiness (21.8%), cheating in exams (28.3%), breaking school rules (26.5%) and disobeying teachers (21.9 %), which reflect the types of problems that school personnel are faced with.

Interestingly, alcohol drinking ranked third (30.5%), even more frequently reported than smoking (18.7%). According to the current study, 42.5 % of boys and 19.1% of girls reported that they had taken alcohol in the past one year. Alcohol drinking ranked second among boys and fourth among girls in terms of frequency of occurrence. Adolescent drinking may in fact pose a potentially more serious youth behavior than smoking as indicated by the lower percentage of adolescents who smoked (27.4% boys and 10.4% girls). That drug experimentation ranked lowest in frequency (4.7%) was not surprising in view of the severity of Singapore's legal penalty against drug consumption and trafficking. According to researchers, the occasional use of drugs may reflect peer-group

pressure, whereas heavy use and abuse of drugs reflects an emotional problem (Newcomb & Bentler, 1989).

Table 1
Problem Behaviors According to Frequency (N=748)

Variables	N	%
Aggressive behavior	418	55.9
Skipping classes	251	33.6
Drinking alcohol	228	30.5
Cheating in exams	212	28.3
Breaking school rules	198	26.5
Disobeying teachers	164	21.9
Often late for school	163	21.8
Smoking	140	18.7
Fighting	103	13.8
Sex with opposite sex	90	12.0
Vandalism	71	9.5
Shoplifting	60	8.0
Threatening to run from home	50	6.7
Drug experimentation	35	4.7

About one in ten respondents indicated that they had been involved in antisocial behaviors such as fighting (13.8%) and vandalism (9.5%). This is supported by police figures, violent crimes among teens like rioting, robbery and extortion have increased (The Straits Times, 9 July, 1996).

About 8% of the adolescents in the sample admitted to having shoplifted in the past one year. A recent survey of teenagers found that teenagers in school were doing part-time jobs not from necessity, but to afford the good life (The Straits Times, April 26, 1998). The survey also found that working teens are more likely to buy clothes, accessories, costume jewelry, watches, make-up, toiletries and CDs. It is therefore likely that teenagers shoplift to support their materialistic lifestyle. Petty extortion in schools is as persistent as before, but the profile of youths committing them has changed.

About 12% of the respondents had premarital sex. This was higher than the 6% reported by a Straits Times survey (1998) of teens aged between 12 and 19 where only 23 of the 400 teenagers surveyed said that they have had sex. There are two possible explanations for this. First, the Straits Times survey included a lower age group. Second, the interviews were conducted face-to-face, which may resulted in greater unwillingness of respondents to be honest. The trend toward greater sexual promiscuity is reflected in the rise of abortions among teenage girls. Latest Ministry of Health figures showed that in 1996 there were 1,487 abortions among girls aged between 10 and 19, or four teenage abortions a day. (There are about 412,100 teenagers).

Based on the findings of the current study, about 7% had threatened at some time or other to run away from home. This poses a social problem as today's runaway may stay away for as long as a year. The runaway youth work illegally and stay

with friends. Without pocket money from their parents, the teenagers take on a variety of work illegally as waiters at discotheques or restaurants. In some cases, the girls resort to prostitution for money. As noted by Mr. Ee, the Bukit Ho Swee Family Service Center's coordinator, "There are more opportunities for young people to survive when they run away because they have a support system out there, aside from their families. Society has evolved and the family is not that strong" (The Sunday Times, December 14, 1997).

Gender Differences

Anova analysis showed that boys had much higher frequency than girls ($F=62.42$, $P<.001$). Table 2 shows that boys outnumbered girls on all school misbehaviors, although the gender difference was less for cheating in exams (boys, 35.1%; girls 21.9%), reflecting the greater concern that girls have toward academic performance.

Table 2
Gender Differences in Problem Behaviors

Variables	Male(N=365)		Female (N=383)	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
School Misconduct				
Skipping classes	110	(30.1)	54	(14.1)
Breaking school rules	137	(37.5)	61	(15.9)
Disobeying teachers	110	(30.1)	54	(14.1)
Often late for school	111	(30.4)	52	(13.6)
Cheating in exams	128	(35.1)	84	(21.9)
Delinquency				
Losing temper and becoming Aggressive	164	(44.9)	166	(43.3)
Fighting	83	(22.7)	20	(5.2)
Vandalism	53	(14.5)	18	(4.7)
Shoplifting	31	(8.5)	29	(7.6)
Premarital sex	62	(17)	28	(7.3)
Threaten to run from home	24	(6.6)	26	(6.8)
Substance Use				
Drinking alcohol	155	(42.5)	73	(19.1)
Smoking	100	(27.4)	40	(10.4)
Drug experimentation	25	(6.8)	10	(2.6)

Self-report data on premarital sex indicated that 17% of boys had been involved in intercourse as compared to only 7.3% of girls. More boys were engaged in vandalism (14.5%) and fighting (22.7% than girls (4.7% and 5.2% respectively). This is collaborated by a recent survey of 150 gangs found that a significant proportion of gang members were males between 13 and 25 (The Straits Times, 10 May 1997). Similarly, more boys were involved in smoking (27.4%) and drinking (42.5%) compared to girls (10.4% and 19.1% respectively).

There are several possible explanations for the gender difference in delinquent behaviors. One is that boys may be more genetically predisposed than girls to react to stress with acting out behaviors (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rutter, 1991).

Boys are also less likely to resist antisocial peer pressure (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Yet another reason is differential cultural expectations of male and female roles in which men are expected to be aggressive and females have been socialized to adopt a more passive role.

There were, however, several exceptions to this gender trend. Almost equal proportion of boys (44.9%) and girls (43.3%) reported losing temper and becoming aggressive. Both genders were also equally represented on shoplifting and threatening to run away from home. These results reflect a trend in the increase in delinquency among teenage girls. Since 1991, the number of girls admitted to homes or placed under supervision because they have gone beyond their parents' control has more than doubled from 46 to 101 in 1996 (The Straits Times, July 3, 1997), a figure that surpassed the number of cases (67) involving boys.

In general, however, the data add to existing research which supports the notion of sex differences in antisocial behaviors, with a higher prevalence in males than females (e.g. Reitsma-Street et al., 1985).

School Types Differences

ITE students reported the most behavioral maladjustment ($F=7.54$, $p<.01$) in contrast to JC students. As seen in Table 3, ITE students scored highest on most of the problem behaviors with the exception of skipping classes. With the exception of losing temper and becoming aggressive, the ITE students had the highest frequency, followed by SP and then JC students on delinquency problems such as vandalism, shoplifting, running away from home, and substance abuse. On school related problems, JC students reported higher frequency on authority-related issues such as disobeying teachers and breaking school rules. SP students struggle with discipline issues such as tardiness in school attendance.

Table 3
School Types Differences in Problem Behaviors (N=748)

	JC N=203		SP N=288		ITE N=253	
	Freq	(%)	Freq	(%)	Freq	(%)
School Misconduct						
Skipping classes	61	(30.0)	120	(41.7)	70	(27.2)
Disobeying teachers	49	(24.1)	54	(18.8)	61	(23.7)
Breaking school rules	68	(33.5)	59	(20.5)	71	(27.6)
Often late for school	33	(16.3)	80	(27.8)	50	(19.5)
Cheating in exams	36	(17.7)	73	(25.3)	103	(40.1)
Delinquency						
Losing temper and Becoming aggressive	88	(43.3)	122	(42.4)	120	(46.7)
Fighting	18	(8.9)	41	(14.2)	44	(17.1)
Vandalism	15	(7.4)	22	(7.6)	34	(13.2)
Shoplifting	9	(4.4)	18	(6.3)	33	(12.8)
Premarital sex	6	(3.0)	36	(12.5)	48	(18.7)
Threaten to run away	8	(3.9)	18	(6.3)	24	(9.3)
Substance Use						
Drinking alcohol	46	(22.7)	88	(30.6)	94	(36.6)

Smoking	11	(5.4)	57	(19.8)	72	(28.9)
Drug experimentation	4	(2.0)	9	(3.1)	22	(8.6)

These school-type differences in pattern of problem behaviors reflect their family background. That ITE students reported the highest frequency of problem behaviors may be explained by the lower socio-economic status of their family backgrounds. Further analysis of data revealed that ITE students were less likely to receive parental support and more likely to report unsatisfactory communication with their parents. In contrast, JC students were more likely to come from higher SES backgrounds where parents were more educated and more involved in their adolescents' everyday life.

Correlations with Fathers' and Mothers' Parenting Behaviours

The results presented in Table 4 showed that adolescents who have problem behaviors were associated with cold and rejectant fathers and mothers. Findings revealed higher behavioral risk was associated with father inconsistency, coercive control and psychological control. There were no significant correlations for corresponding mother control variables. A conflictual relationship with father was more highly associated with behavioral maladjustment than for mother-adolescent interactions. These results indicate that adolescents' negative perception of father control was a more significant correlate of problem behaviors.

Table 4

Correlations between Parenting Behaviors and Problem Behaviors

Parenting Variables	Father	Mother
Warmth	-.12**	-.13**
Strictness	.10**	-.06
Autonomy-support	-.09*	-.09*
Inconsistency	.11*	.01
Coerciveness	.13**	.05
Psychological Control	.10*	.08
Induction	-.07	-.07
Communication	-.16**	-.16**
Disclosure	-.08	-.12**
Affect	-.19**	-.15**

*p<.05, ** p<.01

Subsequent t-test results showed that adolescents who had negative perceptions of their fathers' parenting behaviors reported more truancy, substance use, sexual promiscuity, and incidents of threatening to run away from home. For example, strict fathers were more likely to have adolescents who were involved in alcohol drinking ($t=3.05$, $p<.001$) and teenage sex ($t=2.82$, $p=.01$); while inconsistent fathers were associated with greater extent of truancy ($t=-3.48$, $p<.001$) and sexual promiscuity ($t=1.96$, $p<.05$). The use of coercive control by fathers was similarly related to school misconduct ($t=2.87$, $p=.01$), sexual promiscuity ($t=3.25$, $p<.001$), smoking ($t=2.30$, $p<.02$) and drinking ($t=2.64$, $p<.01$). Mother's coercive control did not seem to have significant relationship to adolescent antisocial problems and school misconduct. On the other hand, adolescents who reported having close communication with mother were less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors. In

summary, the results indicate differential associations with father and mother's parenting, with slightly high correlations with father control measures.

CONCLUSION

The uptrend in juvenile delinquency in recent years may be viewed as another result of the loosening of family bonds and the influence of global entertainment industry. As in other Asian societies where the rapid social and economic changes are accompanied by the ascendance of the media and peer culture which compete with the family and the school as agents of socialization and social control in influencing youth values and behaviors (Cheung, 1997), the problem of youth delinquency in Singapore requires intervention programs that aims at strengthening social bonds both in the family and in the school.

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