Does school failure and Teacher's unfairness explain the adolescent's sense of exclusion and their involvement in deviant behaviour?

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Summary

Based on Emler and Reicher's perspective on youth delinquency (1995, 2005) and on the Relational Model of Authority (Tyler & Lind, 1992), the present study examines the effect of school performance and teacher's procedural fairness on the adolescent's feelings of exclusion and on their intention to engage in deviant behavior.

Introduction

According to Emler and Reicher (1995), delinquency is the behavioural expression where adolescents reject and are opposed to formal systems and institutional authority. This occurs because adolescents lack confidence in institutional authorities and, in this sense, Emler and Reicher (2005) argue that the adolescent's involvement in deviant behavior is linked to and sustained by a sense of exclusion and alienation from authorities, a process which has its roots in the adolescent's experience of school authorities. Some of these ideas have been receiving empirical support (see Emler & Reicher, 1995).

On the other hand, the Relational Model of Authority (RMA) assumes that people use the feedback they have received from group authorities to define their social identity (Tyler & Lind, 1992). The model posits that it is only when authorities are considered legitimate, that people voluntarily accept and comply with their decisions and with group rules and norms. In turn, that legitimacy is mainly based on the perception that authorities use fair procedures in decision

making. Procedural fairness is so important because it provides identity-relevant information, namely how much people are accepted, respected and valued members in that group. More recently, Lind (2001) has also argued that people value fair procedures because they affirm their sense of belongingness to the group.

In a previous correlational study attempting to integrate the RMA (Tyler & Lind, 1992), with Emler and Reicher's (1995, 2005) theory of delinquency, Gouveia-Pereira & Sanches (submitted) found that perceptions of justice concerning teachers are negatively related to the adolescents' involvement in deviant behavior, even after controlling the effect of school failure. The present research aims to provide further evidence for the integration of these perspectives, this time using an experimental design. Our first hypothesis was that adolescents will feel more excluded when teachers use unfair procedures rather than fair procedures, as well as when adolescents experience failure at school rather than success. Our second hypothesis is that adolescents will express stronger intentions to engage in deviant behaviour when teachers use unfair procedures rather than fair procedures, as well as when adolescents experience failure at school, rather than success. Our third hypothesis is that the relationship between teacher's procedural fairness and the adolescent's intentions to engage in deviant behaviour is mediated by their feelings of exclusion from teachers.

Materials and Methods

110 Portuguese adolescents, aged between 13 and 16 (M = 14.1; SD = .93; 45% male) participated voluntarily. The design was a 2 (Teachers procedural fairness: High vs. Low) X 2 (School Performance: School success vs. School failure) between subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly allocated to the experimental conditions.

Data was collected in the classroom. Participants were first presented with a scenario where the teachers procedural fairness was manipulated and were asked to imagine that the situation described happened to them. After reading the scenario, the dependent measures were solicited. All questions were answered on 5-point scales (ranging from totally disagree [1] to totally agree [5]). To assess feelings of exclusion from teachers, participants were asked whether they felt: 1) ignored by those teachers; 2) that those teachers preferred that they didn't belong to the class; 3) rejected by those teachers; 4) accepted by those teachers (reverse coded); 5) that those teachers put them apart. These items were combined to form an average "feelings of exclusion from teachers" score (= .91; M = 3.06; SD = 1.15). The higher the score, the stronger the feelings of exclusion. To assess intentions to engage in deviant conduct,

participants were required to fill out a 20-item scale (adapted from Gouveia-Pereira & Carita, 2005). These items were combined to form an average "intention to engage in deviant behaviour" score (α = .94; M = 2.04; SD = .79). The higher the score, the stronger the intention. Thereafter, participants were presented with 5 items to check whether our teachers' procedural fairness manipulation was successful. These items were combined to form an average "manipulation check" score (α = .96; M = 2.57; SD = 1.18). The higher the score, the higher the teacher's procedural fairness is. Finally, along with the socio-demographic data solicited, participants were asked if they had ever failed a year at school and, if so, how many times. Those who had already failed were allocated to the school failure condition and those who had never failed were allocated to the school success condition. The distributions of school success and school failure were not significantly different among the high procedural fairness conditions (51% vs. 49%) and the low procedural fairness conditions (68% vs. 32%), $\chi^2(1,110) = 3.50$, p = .062).

Results

A 2 (teachers procedural fairness) X 2 (school performance) ANOVA on the average manipulation check score revealed only a significant main effect of teachers procedural fairness, F(1,105) = 151.84, p = .000: participants considered that teachers treated them more fairly in the high procedural fairness condition (M = 3.51; SD = .74) rather than in the low procedural fairness condition (M = 1.68; p = .72).

A 2 X 2 ANOVA on the average feelings of exclusion from teachers score revealed a significant main effect of teachers procedural fairness, F(1,106) = 196.24, p = .000: participants in the low procedural fairness condition felt more excluded from teachers than did those in the high procedural fairness condition (Ms = 3.98 vs. 2.12, SDs = .66 vs. .67, respectively). No significant main effect of school performance emerged, F(1,106) = .381, p = .538, nor an interaction effect, F(1,106) = .769, p = .383.

A 2 X 2 ANOVA on the average intention to engage in deviant behaviour score revealed a significant main effect of teachers procedural fairness, F(1,106) = 10.01, p = .002: participants in the low procedural fairness condition reported a greater intention to engage in deviant activities than did those in the high procedural fairness condition (Ms = 2.23 vs. 1.87, SDs = .89 vs. .60, respectively). Also, a significant main effect of school performance emerged, F(1,106) = 7.53, p = .007: participants having experienced school failure reported stronger intentions to engage in deviant activities than those with school success (Ms = 2.25 vs. 1.93, SDs = .86 vs. .70, respectively). No significant interaction effect emerged, F(1,106) = 1.54, p = .22.

As recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), three regression equations were estimated to analyze the mediation effect of feelings of exclusion from teachers in the relationship between teachers' procedural fairness and adolescents' deviant intentions. Results showed that: 1) teachers procedural fairness was negatively related to adolescents' feelings of exclusion (β =- .84, p<.001); 2) teachers procedural fairness was negatively related to deviant intentions (β = -.17, p< .005); and 3) when simultaneously regressed with teachers procedural fairness, feelings of exclusion were positively related to deviant intentions (β = .25, p< .001), but teachers procedural fairness was no longer significant. These results indicate a full mediation effect, whose significance was confirmed by the results of Sobel z test (z = - 2.68, p< .01).

Conclusions

Overall, results confirmed our hypotheses. Both school failure and teacher's use of unfair procedures independently increase the adolescent's intentions to engage in deviant behavior. Nonetheless while school failure by itself doesn't make adolescents feel excluded, teachers use of unfair procedures does. Teacher's use of fair procedures in the classroom seems to communicate to adolescents that they are valued and accepted members in that group, as hypothesized by the RMA (Tyler & Lind, 1992) and contributes to their sense of belongingness to the group (Lind, 2001). Furthermore, results indicate that feelings of exclusion from teachers fully mediated the relationship between teachers' unfairness and intentions to engage in deviance, therefore supporting Emler & Reicher's (2005) argument that delinquency is linked to feelings of exclusion from authorities.

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