

Hot Topics in Developmental Research

UNDERSTANDING GIRLS' PROBLEM BEHAVIOR



How Girls'
Delinquency
Develops in the
Context of Maturity
and Health,
Co-Occurring
Problems, and
Relationships

EDITED BY
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 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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HOT TOPICS IN DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH

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Friends, Lovers and Groups: Key Relationships in Adolescence

Edited by Rutger C. M. E. Engels, Margaret Kerr and Håkan Stattin

What Can Parents Do?: New Insights into the Role of Parents in Adolescent Problem Behavior

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*We dedicate this book to the memory of Xiaojia Ge, a devoted
scholar in the area of girls' problem behavior and a valued
colleague and mentor*

About the Editors

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Introduction

Girls' Problem Behavior: From the What to the Why

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Girls' problem behavior, or at least their delinquency, is less rare than commonly thought. Even though girls' issues and girls' problems are of great concern for societies as well as researchers, and despite a growing interest in unravelling the processes and mechanisms behind girls' problem behavior, the knowledge base in this area is still meager. There are exceptions, of course, and what these exceptions indicate is that the causes, expressions, development, and trajectories for many of the problems experienced by young people may differ as a function of gender (Bell, Foster, and Mash, 2005). To date, though, there are only a few longitudinal studies that have provided insight into the potentially different adjustment processes experienced by boys and girls. In addition, studies with a focused female perspective are few, in contrast to the bulk of research and literature directed toward understanding the development of boys. The overarching purpose of this volume is to yield an improved understanding of some of the key aspects of girls' problem behaviors. Drawing on studies of the maturing girl and following her through adolescence, into adulthood, and up to the point where she, herself, becomes a parent, we want to illustrate the process of initiating, establishing, and potentially overcoming problem behavior, and the processes that contribute to this development.

GOING FROM THE WHAT TO THE WHY

Despite the increasing prevalence and severity of girls' problem behavior over the past decades, a review of female juvenile delinquency (Hoyt and Scherer, 1998) concluded that delinquent girls are "misunderstood by the juvenile justice system" and "neglected by social science" (p. 81). Specifically, research on the development of girls' problem behavior was virtually non-existent until the 1970s and 1980s, and some argue that the few studies that did focus on girls were characterized by trying to 'fit' girls and women into theoretical models originally designed to explain the development of male problem behavior (i.e., the "add women and stir" approach, Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988). This is perhaps not so strange, given that the gender gap in serious antisocial behavior is well documented. Boys do suffer more often than girls from this type of psychopathology, and the problem behaviors boys engage in are often more physically harmful to themselves and others than problem behaviors expressed by girls (see Crick and Zahn-Waxler, 2003). Further, childhood risk factors are much poorer predictors of adult criminality for girls than they are for boys, and concurrent associations between risk and protective factors and delinquency are generally weaker for girls than for boys (e.g., Fagan *et al.*, 2007). Hence, boys' and men's adjustment problems are more visible to us – both as researchers and as members of society – and with the theoretical models at hand they are easier to understand and explain. And if these models have worked so well for boys, why not try them out on girls as well?

Clearly, there are findings that support the notion that the mechanisms and processes behind problem behaviors are the same for boys and girls. For example, the same risk and causal factors seem to predict similar trajectories of problem behavior regardless of gender (Moffitt *et al.*, 2001; Lahey *et al.*, 2006; Van Hulle *et al.*, 2007). However, there may be specific gender differences in risk factors that are understudied, and therefore remain to be uncovered. Thus, instead of focusing on differences in the specific types of problem behavior across the sexes – which has been the major research focus until now (Moffitt *et al.*, 2001; Fagan *et al.*, 2007; Van Hulle *et al.*, 2007) – the main topic on our research agenda should be the examination of different *etiologies* of problem behavior for the sexes, which may come about as a result of differences in magnitude of and exposure to actual and perceived risks.

Even though females' problem behavior may be less common and serious than males', this does not mean that they are insignificant for the girls themselves or for society. This volume presents data showing that conduct disorder, which is strongly linked to delinquency, is the second most common psychiatric disorder among girls in the USA, UK, and New Zealand. In addition, girls accounted for a sizeable 24% of arrests for aggravated assault, 35% of forgery arrests, and 40% of embezzlement charges for American delinquents in 2003 (Pajer, Lourie, and Leininger, Chapter 4, this volume). Important to note, also, is that over the past decades girls seem to have 'moved on' from

relatively minor misconducts such as shoplifting, social forms of aggression (i.e., actively isolating and gossiping about others), and vandalism to more serious crimes such as assault and robbery. Between 1980 and 2003, arrest rates for assaults by girls in the US increased explosively, by more than 250% (Pajer, Lourie, and Leininger, Chapter 4, this volume). Over the past 23 years in the United States, arrest rates for female juveniles for simple and aggravated assaults have increased, while these same rates for juvenile males decreased. In Canada a similar trend is apparent; between 1996 and 2002 a slight decrease occurred in the rate of violent crime committed by boys but a modest increase surfaced for girls, reflecting more frequent engagement in common assault (Moretti and Osbuth, Chapter 9, this volume). Hence, the fact that girls and women are not engaged in serious antisocial behavior to the same extent as boys and men does not mean that their antisocial behavior should be disregarded. Rather, it seems as if we have to revise some of our preconceptions about female maladjustment.

In addition to these increasing prevalence rates, it is important to note that more than for boys, for girls the development of externalizing behavior seems to be characterized by relatively high levels of functional impairment and comorbidity with other – mostly internalizing – psychopathologies. This is important, because adolescents who suffer from comorbid conditions (e.g., being diagnosed with clinical-level depression and conduct disorder) are at increased risk for a diversity of poor outcomes on domains such as work, friendships and romantic relationships, etc. The increased risk for poor outcomes may be particularly true for girls, as previous studies on suicidal ideation and behavior showed that this behavior was significantly more prevalent in conduct disordered adolescent girls than boys (Keenan, Chapter 6, this volume). For instance, one study showed that highly aggressive girls age 14–15 years have three times the observed rate of attempted suicide that boys have (Cairns, Petersen, and Neckerman, 1988). This means that even though the consequences and correlates of girls' antisocial behavior probably are somewhat different than those of boys', they can be equally detrimental for the individuals themselves and the people around them.

In the 10 years since Hoyt and Scherer drew their conclusion that female delinquency was understudied, there has been a growing consensus that in order to develop a complete understanding of girls' problem behavior, it is necessary to uncover the processes and mechanisms that are unique for the development of misconduct in girls. In more empirical terms, one could say that we need to start treating gender as more than a control variable (Fagan *et al.*, 2007). Knowledge in this area is advancing rapidly now, and because research is presently being conducted from many different theoretical and disciplinary angles, we consider it a 'hot topic' in developmental research. The time is ripe to summarize these advancements. In this volume, we do so by presenting a variety of intriguing studies that go from the what to the why, examining in detail the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of female misconduct.