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FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: A REVIEW OF THEORIES

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to use the blend of interactional theory, family communication patterns theory as well as primary socialization theory to theorize the trajectory of juvenile delinquency. The paper argues that a possible trajectory of juvenile delinquency may be one which proceeds from the manner in which parents communicate with their juvenile children and terminates with the influence of “peer cluster”. Based on the propositions of family communication theory, the author argues that conformity orientation will engender a lack of attachment or bond with parents which will predispose a child to having his or her peers as dominant source of influence in his or her life. Primary socialization theory suggests that a gap between parents and juveniles enables a social environment for peer clusters to dictate the outcome of such juveniles. On the bases of primary socialization theory, the paper submits a conceptual framework to work out a theoretical pathway for juvenile delinquency.

KEYWORDS: Family Communication, Juvenile delinquency, Juveniles, Peer cluster, Parents

1. INTRODUCTION

Juvenile delinquency is any act or behaviour of minors between the ages of twelve and twenty-one which contravenes the law of a nation and is at variance with norms and mores of a society (Johnson, 2005; Boakye, 2013). Juvenile justice in Nigeria, however, regards juvenile delinquency as anti-social behaviour of young persons under the age of 18. Instances of juvenile delinquency includes bullying, truancy, stealing, rape, sexual assault and alcohol misuse (Aborisade, 2016). An investigation about the relationship between juvenile delinquency and family instability in Owerri municipality in Nigeria revealed that delinquent youth usually come from broken homes characterized by poor parent-child communication (Ugwuoke and Duruji, 2015). Further, lack of supportive communication and conversation domination in parent-children relationship are noted to be related to delinquency (Smith and Stern, 1997).

Causal explanation of juvenile delinquency has attracted serious consideration by scholars in the fields of criminology and sociology (Thornberry & Krohn, 2004) with many theories such as Social Control Theory, General Theory of Crime, Labeling Theory, Differential Association Theory, Social Learning Theory and Interactional Theory, to mention a few, emerging to explain association and correlation between juvenile delinquency and family (Thornberry, 1987; Rankin & Kern, 1994; Jang, 1999; Augustine, 2012). Also, some empirical studies confirm causal relationship between family and delinquency (Monique & Adrian, 2001; Juby & Farrington, 2001; Adam & Clark, 2015) noting that parental attachment and communication between parents and children are among significant variables in the study of juvenile delinquency (Shields & Clark, 2015). For instance, Shields and Clark (2015) remark that open parent-child communication is capable of lowering involvement in juvenile delinquency. Studies indicated that open and less problematic communication between parents and their adolescent children lower delinquent behaviours and increase the likelihood to engage in pro-social behaviour (Simoës, Matos & Batista-Foguet, 2008; Goncy & Dulmen, 2010; Al-mataka, Hussnat, 2012). Thus, there seems to be a nexus between juvenile delinquency and parent-child interpersonal communication within a familial context.

Familial context that engenders the assimilation of pro-social values and norms by adolescents is facilitated through parent-child interaction (Rankin & Well, 1990). For example, researchers have shown that a significant number of adolescents that engage in delinquent behaviour have strained relationship with their parents and less parental attachment (Sanni, Udoh, Okediji, Modo & Ezeh, 2010; Boakye, 2012). Goncy and Dulmen (2010) have observed greater communication between parents and sons in a sample of delinquent males to reduce rate of delinquency. With these observations, it is rational to assume that pro-social behaviour could be instilled in a child under a positive parent-child relational context established through effective interpersonal communication. It can further be assumed that terse interpersonal communication between parents and child could prohibit transmission of pro-social norms and values and prevents bond between parents and children. It is the goal of this paper to interrogate Interactional theory, Family Communication theory and Primary Socialization theory in order to explain existing nexus between family communication patterns and juvenile delinquency in many parts of the world.

INTERACTIONAL THEORY

Interactional theory was propounded by Thornberry in 1987. The theory posits that juvenile delinquency often occurs as a result of attenuation of social control wielded by the family, school and religious organizations (Thornberry & Krohn, 2004; McGuigan, Vuchinich & Ta Tang, 2014). It maintains that children who are strongly attached to, monitored by and involved with, their families are less likely to get involved in delinquency due to the influence (control) of their parents that keeps off the pressure of delinquent peer influence (Thornberry, 1987). Interactional theory posits that delinquency in a child becomes inevitable where instructional control is lowered in the life of a child. Thornberry (2004) sees the development of juvenile delinquency as arising from association with delinquent peers. He further argued that timely control on children elicits a measure of checks against involvement of children in delinquent subculture.

The word “control” in Interactional theory is conceptualized as constraint on a child’s behaviour facilitated most times through parental monitoring (Thornberry & Krohn, 2004). But, sometimes, this constraint could be a self-regulatory measure in a child created by attachment with the child’s parents and based on cordial parent-child relationship. The constraint imposed by parents on a child alerts the child in the face of temptation to refrain from anti-social behaviour. This sort of check on a child’s behaviour, termed virtual supervision, does not necessarily require the physical presence of the parents (Thornberry & Krohn, 2004).

Virtual supervision occurs when a child refrains from anti-social behaviour on the basis of consideration of response of his parents to his intended behaviour. Hirschi (1969) argues that virtual supervision is more of a function of intimacy of communication than supervision. In response to intimacy of communication between parents and their adolescent children, Patchin (2006:31) notes that “Youths who share their experiences with their parents on a regular basis are more likely to consider the response of their parents before engaging in proscribed activities”. Therefore, adolescents with strong attachment with parents are very unlikely to indulge in delinquent behaviour, whereas a brittle relationship with parents opens up vistas of opportunity to contact delinquent peers (Thornberry, 1987; Moitra & Mukherjee, 2010).

Interactional theory offers a number of propositions about juvenile delinquency. The first proposition is that weakening of social bonds between parent and child leads to a child getting involved with delinquent network; that is, involvement with delinquent network increases the chances of being delinquent. The second proposition is that the influence of control of a parent over a child’s delinquent behaviour weakens as a child moves through adolescence. The third proposition is that continual indulgence in delinquent behaviour impacts on parent-child relationship by creating gap and negativity which will further deepen a child’s delinquency due to decline of instructional control. Drawing from this theory, the researcher conjectures that interpersonal communication between parents and their delinquent children could be characterized by lack of love and affection, completely bereft of positive emotions and revealing serious frustration on the part of parents and their delinquent children. Another assumption drawn from this theory is that continuous indulgence in juvenile delinquency by children could lead to *sharp decline* in instructional control of parents.

Interactional theory builds on a combination of basic concepts of social control and social learning theories: attachment to parents, commitment to school, belief in conventional values, association with delinquent peers and adoption of delinquent values and delinquent

behaviour (Jang, 1999). First, attachment to parents is the social-psychological affiliation of adolescents to parents manifested through “affectional identification” (love and respect which a child has for his or her parents) and intimacy of communication and supervision (Rankin & Kern, 1994:496). Second, commitment to school means the stake in conformity which an adolescent has developed and it includes factors such as success in school, perceived importance of education, attachment to teachers and other rewarding school activities. The third concept is belief in conventional value which means granting legitimacy to right course in life such as education, personal industry, financial success and deferral of gratification. The first three concepts are derived from Hirschi's social control theory--- a theory postulating a model for reason for not indulging in delinquency. The fourth, fifth and sixth concepts are association with delinquent peers, development of delinquent value and delinquent behaviour. Of all these six concepts, attachment to parents and association with delinquent peers are worthy of consideration in this study. However, a discussion on association with delinquent peers shall be considered under Primary Socialization Theory.

Interactional theory argues that strong bond between parent and child is a preventive measure against juvenile delinquency. The bond between a child and a parent is formed by a child's relationship to his or her parents through cordial interpersonal processes (Oetting & Donnermeyer, 1998). Similarly, Bakar, Wahab and Islam (2015) suggest that communication of love, care and commitment is one of the ways to facilitate parent-child attachment/bond.

A study on the relationship among parental attachment, coping efficiency and anti-social behaviour in some selected divorced families revealed that adolescents with high level of attachment to parents have lower tendency to involve in anti-social behaviour (Bakar, 2015). Parental attachment seems to be an important concept which may act as buffer against juvenile delinquency in that adolescents with positive affectional bonds towards parents are more likely to care about the normative expectations of their parents (virtual supervision).

FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERNS THEORY

Family communication patterns theory was propounded by Ascan Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick in 2002. The theory offers understanding to parent-child interpersonal communication within the context of the family is Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT). The theory suggests that families maintain certain patterns of communication. As adopted in this article, the theory is reviewed to provide insight into stable interpersonal communication between parents and children in familial setting. Family communication pattern is the perpetual manner of communication between parents and children within a family system. Family Communication Patterns Theory explains stable patterns of interaction between parents and children through fundamental insight about how family members create shared meaning of social reality via a cognitive process (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). The theory was adopted by McLeod and Chaffe in 1972 to examine how family members process media messages and come to terms with one another on media offering through a process termed Coordination. “Coordination” means a situation in which two or more individuals focus their cognitive attention on the same object in their social or physical environment and arrive at the same conclusion on the object (Ascan & Schrodt, 2014).

Prior to its modification, concept-orientation and socio-orientation were two dimensions in the process of reaching agreement among family members concerning media messages. Concept-orientation explains the process by which family members jointly discover the attributes of an object by discussing its properties, characteristics and outcomes, while, socio-orientation encapsulates the process by which a member of a family is allowed to determine the attributes of an object for all family members. Later, the theory was modified to reflect stable communication behaviours by which family members reach agreement. Fitzpatrick and Ritchie in 2002 re conceptualize Mcleod and Chaffee's concepts, placing emphasis on communication behaviours of family members in the process of achieving fair consensus. Concept orientation therefore was reconceptualized as conversation orientation, while socio-orientation was reconceptualized as conformity orientation.

For the purpose of emphasis, Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) is a theory that describes the predictable patterns by which members of a family come to agree on any issue as members of an interdependent social system. Through FCPT, one can easily describe probable relational dynamics in parent-child relationship through a variety of topics over which parents and children interact.

FCPT is foregrounded on two dimensions of orientations-conversation and conformity orientations. These two orientations exist along two polar ends—high and low. Conversation orientation is conceptualized as the degree to which family creates a social environment in which family members have freedom to interact over a wide array of topics. Family members high on conversation orientation freely, frequently and spontaneously interact with each other without limitation in terms of topics of discussion. Conversely, members of family on the low end of this continuum interact less and there is a limit to the topics of their discussion. Family with low conversation orientation provides no room for open expression of feelings, thoughts and activities. The belief guiding families high in conversation orientation is that open and frequent expression of family issues and interaction among family members are essential to happy living and mutual coexistence. Parents holding conversation orientation to parent-child interaction see frequent communication as a way to socialize their children (Rueter & Koerner, 2008), while family low in conversation orientation, may not see frequent and open communication as necessary for optimal family functioning. The assumption that interaction with delinquent peers may lead to cultivation of delinquent behaviour in youth makes sense within a theoretical position which implies that lack of frequent and open interaction between parents and children create a vacuum which predisposes a child to association with delinquent peers. For instance, interactional context that facilitates discussion of the consequences of a child's action on others and on the society are more likely than one that discourages such discussion to foster the internalization of pro-social values.

Conformity orientation is the second dimension of family communication pattern theory. It is the degree to which families stress homogeneity of attitude, values and belief. Families high on conformity orientation are characterized by interactions that seek to emphasize uniformity of belief, attitude and values. Parents in families high in conformity orientation make decisions for their children and expect absolute compliance with instructions. In hetero-generational exchanges of families high in conformity orientation, parents usually demand for conformity with values, norms and attitudes. Families low in conformity orientation, however, demonstrate

lax in parental control, stressing heterogeneous attitudes and beliefs and individuality of family members (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). There is a sense of equality in hetero-generational exchange in families low in conformity orientation dimension. The author assumes that the pattern of interaction between parents and delinquent children may be one which leans towards low conformity orientation as freedom of children that leads to association with delinquent peers might only take place where there is weak insistence on compliance to family standards of morality. However, this assumption needs clarification through empirical study. The third theory to be examined is Primary socialization theory.

PRIMARY SOCIALIZATION THEORY

Primary Socialization Theory (PST) was propounded in 1998 by Oetting and DonnerMeyer. The theory states that a child is taught normative values or deviance (delinquency) through interaction with three key primary sources of socialization, namely family, school and peer cluster (Oetting & DonnerMeyer, 1998; Higgins, Ricketts Marcum and Mahoney, 2010). According to PST, socialization is the process through which pro-social and anti-social norms are transmitted via communication to a child. PST asserts that transmission of pro-social norms takes place where there is a bond between a child and parents, a child and school and a child and peer clusters that hold pro-social norms. Bonds are channels used to transmit pro-social norms (in rare cases, parents transmit deviant norms) through communication. Weak bond between children and parents, between children and school and between children and pro-social peer cluster is a risk factor for deviance and a trigger for juvenile delinquency (Rosenbaum, 1989). PST theory particularly underscores stronger bonds with peers as channels with higher probability of transmitting deviant norms (a roundabout way of stating that weak bond with parents could lead to association with delinquent peer cluster).

PST highlights the primacy of peer clusters in the transmission of deviant norms through bonds over other possible sources of social influence. PST maintains that other sources of influence have indirect effect on a child through their influence on the primary source of socialization (Oetting & Donnermeyer, 1998). For instance, personality trait, community characteristics as well as the media impact a child's behavioural outcome. This is because they influence primary socialization sources or the process of socialization. Oetting and Donnermeyer (1998) posit that unless personality trait, community characteristic, stress or other factors influence bonding with primary socialization sources or alter communication of norms through the primary socialization sources, there will be little or no effect of these (secondary influences) on a child's behaviour. The theory, therefore, underlines parents, school and peer cluster as major sources of influence of a child's behaviour, deemphasizing the role of other factors. The author submits that peer cluster of a child is a direct link to juvenile delinquency.

PEER CLUSTER

Peer cluster consists of "best friend dyads" of adolescents, usually of the same gender, who regularly interact and share private matters of life. They are smaller subset of peer group with some cohesive characteristics which make transmission of either pro-social or deviant norms possible. Members of a peer cluster discuss, share experience, directly monitor and reinforce attitudes and behaviour of one another. Like the other primary sources of socialization, the influence of peer cluster depends on bonding for transmission of either pro-social norms or

deviance (in this case, delinquent) norms. If the peer cluster with which a child interacts holds positive values and communicates pro-social norms, the child is not likely to develop delinquent behaviour; however, if the peers with whom the child interacts cherish deviant norms, tendencies are high that the child will embrace deviant values and end up being delinquent (Haynie & Osgood, 2005).

The selection of peer cluster is due to external factors such as culture, environment, or chance. However, membership of a peer cluster is usually on the basis of similarity. PST postulates that when family-child bonds are strong, most children will develop pro-social norms that will make it easier to select peer cluster that share norms in agreement with society. The theory further argues that when a child's bonds with parents are weak, primary socialization during adolescence may be dominated by peers, most probably delinquent peers. Where dominant primary source of socialization is the peer, for instance, due to weaken bond between parents and a child, it is a possibility that a child will select peers who are pro-social. However, PST strongly theorizes that such possibility is very unlikely, stressing that much of the time, adolescents with weak bonds to parents and family and school seek out or are attracted to youths who are having problems, and hence become delinquent as a result of wrong association (Oetting & DonnerMeyer, 1998).

The three theories so far reviewed highlight the trajectory of juvenile delinquency, suggesting the critical roles of parent-child relationship in the etiology of juvenile delinquency. The first theory, Interactional theory, proposes that lowering of parental control of adolescent children could lead to involvement with delinquent peers and leads ultimately to juvenile delinquency. The position of this theory is that lowering of control is due to weak bond (or attachment) between parents and adolescents. The second theory, Family Communication Patterns theory, suggests the possible patterns of interpersonal communication between parents and their children within family system. While interaction theory posits the conditions which could predispose a child to juvenile delinquency---lowering of social control by parents, and consequently increasing the potential for contact with delinquent subculture---, the second theory, Family communication patterns theory, sheds light on the patterns of interaction between parents and children within family context that may facilitate such possibility or protect against delinquent behaviour. Lastly, Primary socialization theory underscores the influence of delinquent peers as a last contact leading to juvenile delinquency. This paper offers a theoretical explanation that connects parental attachment (or bonding), family communication pattern and interaction with delinquent peers together in a conceptual frame work.

CONCLUSION

Investigating interpersonal communication between delinquent children and their parents seems to have the potential to offer insights into the development of juvenile delinquency, since scholars have examined and found family factors like family structure, marital conflict, family cohesion, and parental rejection to be related to delinquency. Although these factors are important in delinquency studies, the author assumes that investigating interpersonal communication between parents and delinquent juveniles may provide further knowledge in explaining juvenile delinquency, as motivations that underpin delinquent behaviour may be

rooted in parents-child relationship which may be probed through thorough investigation about the nature of family interactions. Interactional theory, Family Communication Patterns theory as well as Primary Socialization theory provide perspectives for this academic investigation through their propositions and assumptions.

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