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Adolescents' attitudes toward human rights and responsibilities: Comparison between juvenile delinquents and nondelinquents

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Abstract

292 adolescents (64 delinquents and double number matched control group), aged 12-17 years were asked to rate the importance of civil, economic, and political rights, and also describe responsibilities of peoples. It was hypothesized that nondelinquents will emphasize more self-determination rights compared with delinquents and research results supported this hypothesis. Differences were found in rankings of rights across two groups of youth with more positive attitudes of juvenile delinquents to protect themselves from harm/violence and to promote their development in the area of labour market.

Findings also indicated that similar attitudes toward peoples' responsibilities reduced to two components among two groups of adolescents - one was related to political responsibilities and the other consists of civic-oriented ones mainly in terms of prosocial behaviour, whereby delinquents emphasise more responsibility for education and nondelinquents' responsibility for privacy.

Introduction

Human rights education is an important feature of citizenship education. The understanding of human rights among children and youth forms a foundation for future practice of rights and responsibilities in the society. Increased international awareness of children's rights is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children (United Nations, 1978). This document outlines children's political, civil, economic and social rights, as been ratified by every member country of the United Nations. In this document we most clearly see the emphasis on balancing children's need for nurturance and their right to self-determination (Melton, 2008). An important aspect in human rights education is children's and adolescents' right to actively participate in society – to be active citizen.

On one hand, over the past three decades there has been a growing interest in adolescents' rights and the tendency to grant young people many of the rights traditionally received for adult members of society (Peterson-Badali and Ruck, 2008).

On the other hand, critics of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children have argued that the current emphasis on rights privileges children's rights over their responsibilities (Ruck and Horn, 2008). Rights and responsibilities are clearly reciprocal constructs and that the former loses its meaning without consideration of the latter (Ruck, Peterson-Badali and Day, 2002). Thus, not only the commitment to young people's rights to both nurturance and self-determination is crucial in institutions that serve children/adolescents (such as schools), but also successful human rights education involves acquiring knowledge of rights and responsibilities.

Although there has been several research on children's understanding of rights (overview: Peterson-Badali and Ruck, 2008), there has been little examining adolescents' views of the specific rights that one would expect to receive through citizenship (Levesque, 2008; Van der Ven, Dreyer and Pieterse, 2000). Previous research has shown that young children typically consider nurturance rights more important than participation (Ruck, Abramovitch and Keating, 1998), but adolescents' view of rights relate to the components of nurturance and self-determination (Sherrod, 2008).

Also, it was shown that the issues of self-determination and rights of individuals to decide on matters that concern them increases during adolescence (Falnagan, Stout and Galloway, 2008).

There has been only few research examining adolescents' views of responsibilities, and it was found that adolescents consider citizenship responsibilities to consists of two components: policy-oriented

responsibilities such as voting and expressing patriotism and civically oriented ones consisting of helping one's community and showing tolerance of others' differences (Sherrrod, 2008).

We must recognize the multiple pathways through which adolescents grow into citizenship. New research questions were raised in this area – how adolescents conceive of their rights associated with risky health behaviour (Falnagan, Stout and Gallay, 2008), and what kind of attitudes adolescents have towards homosexuality and homosexual peoples' rights (Horn, Szalacha and Drill, 2008).

Little is known about the delinquent group adolescents' attitudes toward law, rules, police and authority (Emler and Reicher, 1995; Blackburn, 1993) and towards parents, teachers, police, and the law (Levy, 2001), but there is no research in the area of attitudes toward human rights and responsibilities among juvenile delinquents. It was clearly documented that young peoples' delinquent behavior was associated with hedonistic values and lack of interest in conventional values and social values in society, indicating negative correlation between delinquency and socio-political values (Romero et al., 2001).

Nowadays changes in society raise new research questions – whether or not delinquent behaviours contribute to young peoples' attitudes toward the importance of different human rights and responsibilities.

The aim of the study was to investigate differences in attitudes toward rights and responsibilities between two groups of adolescents: juvenile delinquents versus nondelinquents.

The first research task was to examine differences in two groups of young people's attitudes toward the importance of human rights in terms of civil, economic and political rights. The second task was to describe differences in the two groups of young people's attitudes toward the responsibilities of people.

It was hypothesized that different groups of youth will emphasize different aspects of rights – nondelinquents evaluate more self-determination and political rights compared with delinquents.

Method

Samples

Two independent samples of youth completed a questionnaire about attitudes of human rights and responsibilities. The first sample contained 64 students from two special schools for juvenile delinquents (one school for boys and the other for girls) in Estonia. Institutionalised youth was arrested for theft (100%), added by non-fulfilment of compulsory school attendance (17.33%), violation of public order (13.33%), being drunk in public places (9.33%), robbery (9.33%), assault (9.33%), and motor vehicle theft with group members (6.67%), as officially recorded.

The second, control group, consisted of adolescents from randomly selected two different comprehensive schools from different parts of Estonia. The juvenile delinquents were matched by age and sex the control group (nondelinquents).

The total number of adolescents in the control group was twofold compared with delinquents - 128 ranging from 12-17 years in age ($M = 15.5$, $SD = 1.4$ for boys; $M = 16.36$, $SD = 1.5$ for girls), whereby half of them were female and half male.

Instrument

The human rights questionnaire contains a total of 16 articles addressing the most commonly used civil, economic and political rights (see table 1, first row). Participants were asked to rate how important a particular right was from 1 (*very important*) to 16 (*not at all important*).

Also a self-administrated questionnaire was prepared to measure different aspects of peoples' responsibilities given the open-ended nature of this question (*What kind of responsibilities people have as human beings?*).

Results

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for importance of human rights in two groups using summed rankings. The results of between-group comparison are also reported.

Table 1. Means and analysis of variance for two groups

Importance of rights (ranking of from 1 to 16)	Delinquents (mean)	Controls (mean)	All (mean)	t-value	p-value
Civil rights					
Right to life	2.56	1.48	3.30	2.47	0.01
Right to liberty	5.33	4.62	4.98	1.19	0.11
Right: not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and punishment	4.61	5.95	5.28	-2.74	0.01
Right: not to be held in slavery or servitude	4.78	5.78	5.28	-2.01	0.05
Right to privacy	5.50	3.89	7.44	4.56	0.00
Right to respect for his/her home and family	8.00	8.33	8.17	-0.59	0.27
Right to judicial immunity	9.89	8.43	9.16	2.41	0.01
Freedom of movement and residence	9.44	9.38	9.41	0.11	0.45
Right to own property	10.17	9.31	9.65	1.36	0.09
Right to information	11.61	9.76	10.69	2.90	0.00
Right to privacy of correspondence	10.61	11.43	11.02	-1.27	0.10
Economical rights					
Right to free choice of employment	6.11	7.78	6.95	-2.59	0.01
Right to work	7.50	8.89	8.20	-2.58	0.01
Political rights					
Freedom of assembly and association	11.94	12.41	12.18	-0.94	0.17
Right to vote and to be elected	12.11	12.84	12.48	-1.50	0.07
Right to freedom of opinion and expression	13.39	13.31	13.35	0.16	0.44

If we scrutinise the average scores of rankings in the Table 1, the adolescents appear to be fairly positive about their personal liberties (right to liberty; respect for their home and family; freedom of movement and residence) compared with their political rights (right to elections, freedom assembly and expression).

Research results indicated that four civil rights were more highly evaluated among non-delinquents compared with juvenile delinquents: right to life, right to privacy, right to judicial immunity, and right to information.

Two kinds of civil rights (not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and punishment and not to be held in slavery or servitude) were more important for juvenile delinquents compared with matched controls. Also, juvenile delinquents evaluated more economic rights (right to free choice of employment and right to work) compared with nondelinquent youth.

After data collection, the answers of open-ended question about peoples' responsibilities were coded into categories. A six-category solution was created to account for the content according to different responsibilities listed by two groups of youth. Table 2 displays the percentage of adolescents at each group who listed different peoples' responsibilities.

Table 2. Categories of responsibilities listed by two groups of subjects (percentage)

Categories of peoples' responsibilities	Delinquents	Controls
Education	35%	22%
Expressing patriotism and voting	2%	7%
Caring and helping of other people and showing tolerance of others differences	24%	25%
Not breaking a law	8%	7%
Privacy	7%	18%
Work and employment	24%	21%

It is found that adolescents consider responsibilities to consist of two main components: (1) Polity-oriented responsibilities such as voting and expressing patriotism, and not breaking a law, and (2) civically oriented ones consisting of helping one's community and showing tolerance of others differences, having education, work, employment and private life.

It was revealed that statistically significant differences (measured by χ^2 -values) between frequencies of categories of peoples' responsibilities listed by two groups of youth were following: (1) more juvenile delinquents listed peoples' responsibility for education ($\chi^2=6.1$; $p<.05$), and more nondelinquents mentioned peoples' responsibility for privacy ($\chi^2=9.3$; $p<.05$).

Discussion

Attitudes towards human rights of two groups of adolescents (delinquents versus nondelinquents) were measured by distinguishing between civil, economical and political human rights. Overall, the adolescents displayed more positive attitudes towards civil rights than political rights, supporting previous finding in this area (Van Der Ven et al., 2000; Sherrod, 2008).

Human rights attitudes can be considered multidimensional in nature for adolescents evaluating more civil rights than political rights whereby different groups of adolescents evaluate different aspects of civil rights differently: delinquents evaluated more highly social security to protect themselves from harm/violence; and nondelinquents' personal life and liberties.

Thus, the importance of young people's rights to both nurturance and self-determination was somewhat different among juvenile delinquents emphasizing more personal protection and safety compared with same-age youth not connected with delinquent behaviour who evaluated more personal control over their personal life, information and privacy. Consequently, research results supported hypothesis that delinquent youth evaluate less their right to self-determination compared with matched nondelinquent youth.

Discussions of children's/youth rights are framed in terms of balancing – self-determination versus protection (Melton, 2008). Studies show greater support for children's nurturance rights than self-determination (Peterson-Badali and Ruck, 2008), but our research results indicated that there is one area of human nurturance rights that was especially important for juvenile delinquents – to protect themselves from harm and violence. Contrasting to this result, youth who were not connected with criminal behaviour followed the normal developmental pathway and evaluated more individual rights, supporting previous data in this area (Falnagan, Stout and Gallay, 2008).

Also, differences were found in rankings of rights across two groups of subjects with juvenile delinquents ranking economic rights connected with work (right to free choice of employment and right to work) more highly than did other group of adolescents.

The understanding of human rights among youth forms a foundation for future practice of rights and we may speculate that for juvenile delinquents acquisition of economic rights was an important hallmark of citizenship.

Citizenship involves responsibilities as well as rights. As new rights are offered to children and youth, one must also ask what new responsibilities should accompany these rights. In the same way that youth should be privy to score set of basic human rights, they also need to be given more serious and substantial responsibilities.

Previous research on teens' views of citizenship responsibilities shows that duties are seen to consist of both civic-oriented ones and policy-oriented ones (Sherrod, 2008) and our research results supported this tendency enlarging also our knowledge in this area. Present results indicated that adolescents view citizenship more in terms of civic responsibilities - mainly in terms of prosocial behaviour consisting of helping one's community and showing tolerance of others differences.

Also our data showed that different youth emphasized different aspects of responsibilities, reflecting the probable influence of social context on the development of citizenship. Namely, among civic-oriented responsibilities there were differences among youth - delinquents emphasised more responsibility for education and nondelinquents evaluated more responsibility for privacy.

Summary, following the multidimensional character of human rights and responsibilities, we distinguished between civil and political rights/responsibilities, whereby the first group of rights/responsibilities was more important for both groups of adolescents – delinquents and nondelinquents.

Research indicated that citizenship is viewed to involve both political participation and civic involvement (Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss, 2002). This means that adolescents view citizenship more in terms of civic rights and responsibilities, but there were differences in perceptions of functions of human rights and responsibilities comparison of the delinquent youth with the nondelinquent group.

The perception of mean functions of human rights for delinquent youth was to protect adolescents from harm and to promote their development in the area of labour market; and the responsibilities were related mainly with duties to acquire education.

The perception of mean function of human rights and responsibilities for nondelinquent youth was to promote adolescents personal life and development, especially in the area of privacy.

At one side, the study of attitudes toward rights and responsibilities provides us an opportunity for gaining deeper understanding the development of citizenship with its inherent rights and responsibilities especially among risky youth for more effective practice in this area.

At the other side, our research raises new challenges for research - in what way delinquent behaviour can contribute to the young peoples' attitudes toward the importance of different human rights and responsibilities.

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